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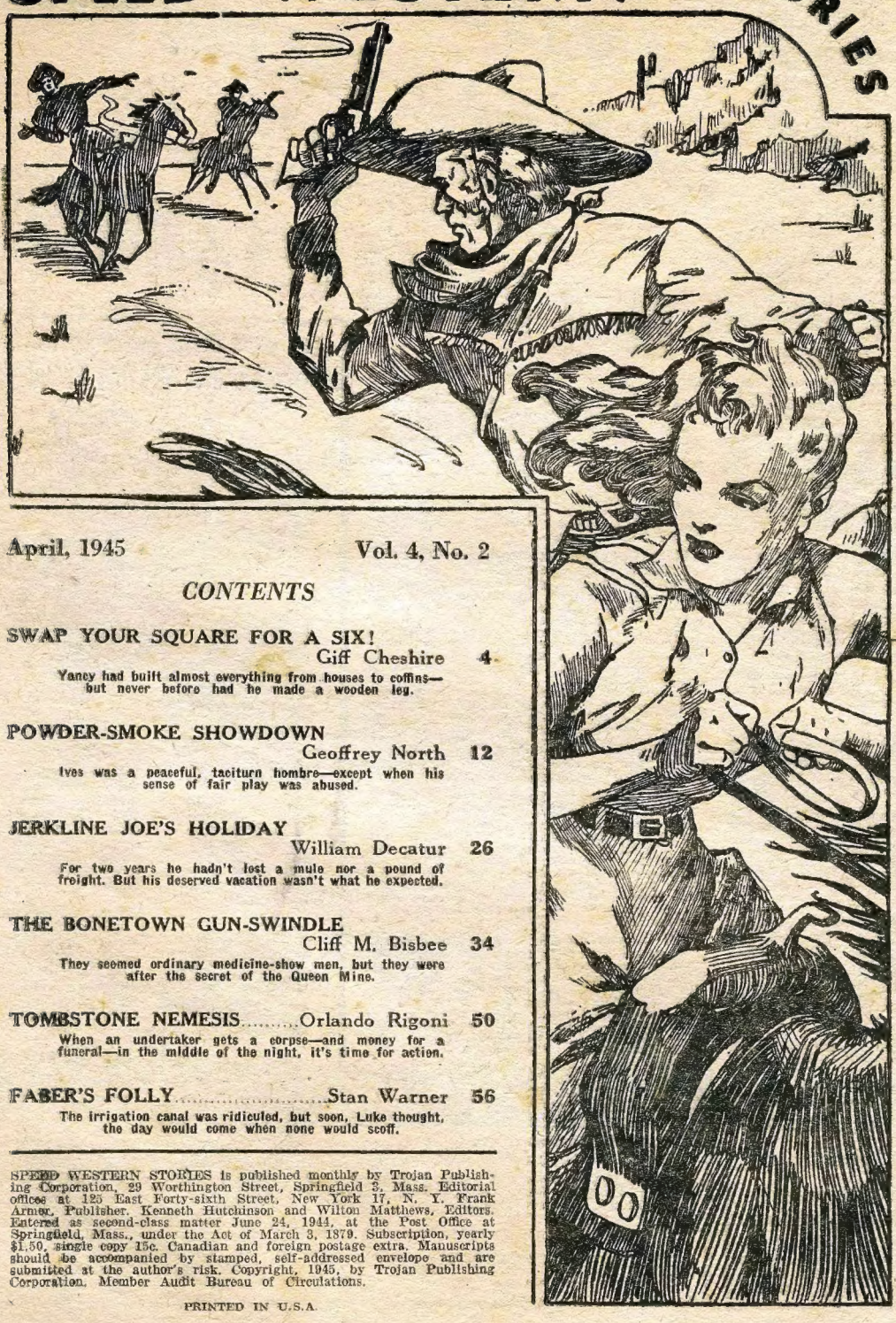

April, 1945 Vol. 4, No. 2

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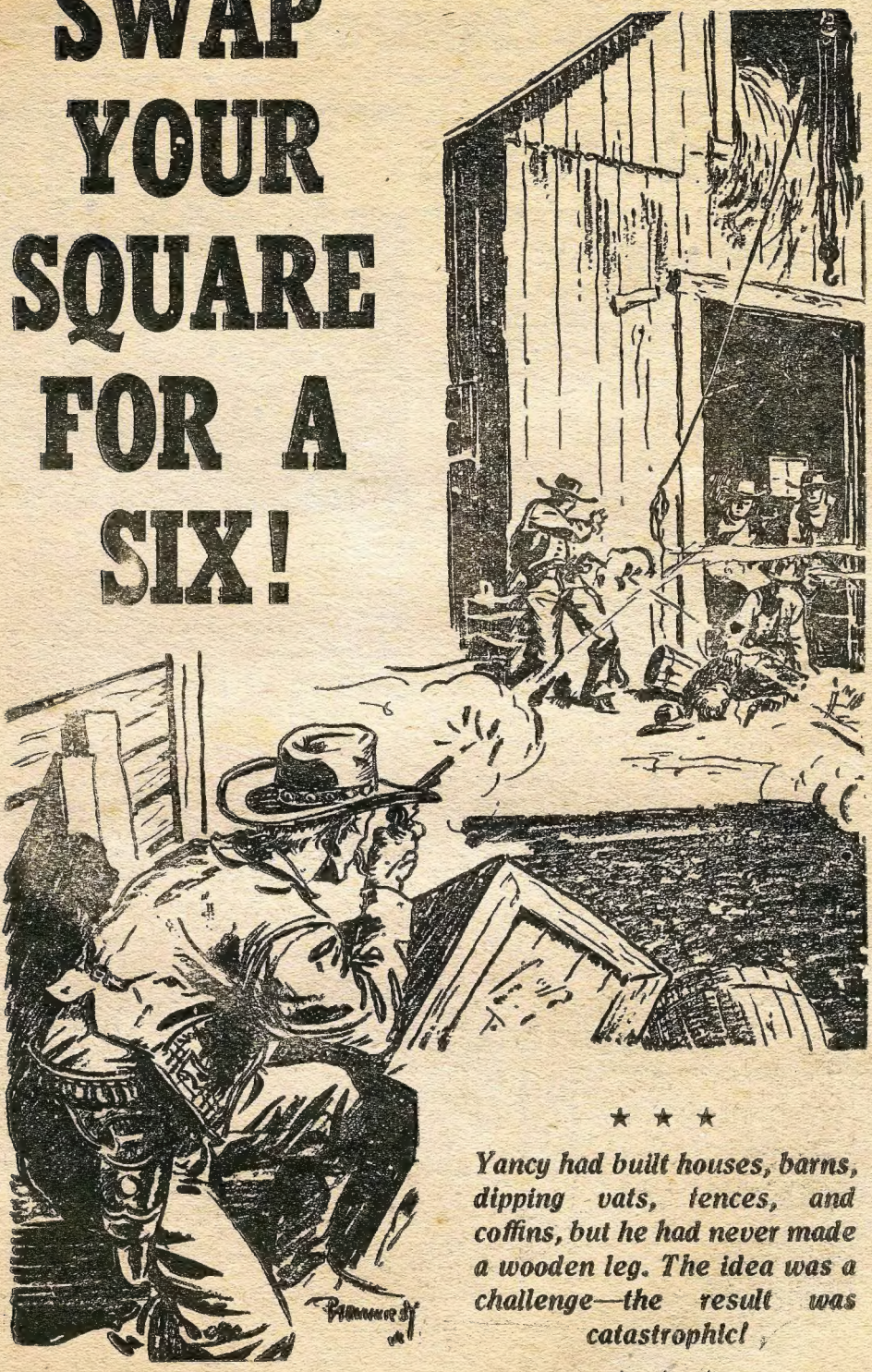


★ ★ ★

Yancy had built houses, barns, dipping vats, fences, and coffins, but he had never made a wooden leg. The idea was a challenge—the result was catastrophic!

★ ★ ★

By GIFF CHESHIRE

THE man who stopped old Yancy Porter on the sundown trail was big and burly. Yancy fidgeted in his saddle. From what he had heard of Joad Woods, owner of the Bar W, he didn't care to do any work for him. Yancy wanted to ride west. As far as he was concerned, he was finished with Tancola Basin.

Joad Woods appeared to have a different idea.

Woods gigged his skittery skewbald and wheeled up beside Yancy's flea-bitten roan. Opery, the pack burro carrying the chests that contained the tools of Yancy's trade, saw that his passage was blocked and fell asleep contentedly.

"I heard you'd finished up in these parts and was fixing to ride on," Woods said. His voice was wheedling in the manner of a man who despises his listener but wants a favor done. "Took a chance on catching you afore you got to the pass. Mighty lucky I did, because I busted my leg."

Yancy's eyes dropped to the man's pegleg and saw that it was held together mostly by hay wire. He looked at it with professional interest. Joad Woods' right leg, somewhere in the past, had been amputated about six inches below the knee. To the stump was strapped a conventional pegleg, now in bad repair. From the front of the peg, about two inches from the tip, extended a steel hook which Woods stuck into his shortened stirrup to give him a firm seat.

"Can you make me a new one, Yancy?" Joad inquired.

They'd hoped for a long fight from good cover, but Yancy wasn't going to allow them that.

"I can make anything." In spite of his plans to push westward, Yancy was interested. Though he would not have admitted it to Joad, in all his years of vagabond carpentry he had never made a wooden leg. He had built houses, barns, sheds, shacks, fences, dipping vats and coffins. He had made calf blabs and fixed wagons. But he had never carved out a pegleg. Now, having come upon the challenge, he knew he was incapable of ignoring it. With a sigh he nudged the roan into motion alongside Joad's skewbald, with Opery meandering behind.

THE BAR W spread was not the biggest but it was as prosperous as any in Tancola Basin. The house site lay in a convergence of long slopes which, with a grove of sprawling box alders, lent protection from winter storms or the now blistering sun.

Joad Woods showed Yancy a vacant shed where he could throw down his soogans and set up his tools. Yancy's head was already busy on the problem of giving Joad a better pegleg than he had ever plied before. This vanity about his work was the old carpenter's greatest joy.

Yancy unpacked what he needed. He scouted up some scrap lumber with which he made sawhorses, and he placed planks on them to make a bench. Then he had Joad unstrap the pegleg so he could measure and study it. He snorted his disdain of the craftsman who had fashioned it, his mind already loaded with improvements he could make. Then he hunted up a section of an old wagon tongue of well-seasoned, straight-grained hickory. Before evening he was happily at work on the new leg.

At supper that evening Yancy learned that all was not well on the Bar W. The hands ate in the big house, and a girl named Bonny waited on the table and apparently was also the cook. Yancy's contempt for the cowman's widely known stinginess grew. The spread certainly could afford a separate cookhouse and a man cook. Bonny was Joad's daughter, Yancy gathered, and unhappiness was plainly stamped on her pretty face.

It made Yancy's hackles rise when he noticed the way some of the hands eyed Bonny. Worst offender was Pete Morton, the ramrod. If Joad Woods was aware of this he gave no sign.

Yancy tagged the crew mentally. The segundo was a bald, cadaverous little creature named Rice, who shared a separate bunkhouse with foreman Pete Morton. The pair stayed pretty much to themselves, Yancy noticed, except during working hours.

Yet the girl's unhappiness seemed to stem from more than the heavy work piled on her and the men she was thus obliged to serve. Yancy smiled at her once, a kindly twinkle in his old eyes, and brought the ghost of a smile to her full lips. Dusk was gathering before Yancy got a full understanding of the situation.

It happened on the vine-covered back porch, and probably neither Joad nor Bonny realized that their voices carried to the shed where Yancy worked on the hickory with his drawing knife.

"You ain't taking yourself any ride!" he heard Joad roar. "You ain't pulling the wool over my eyes, young woman! You're fixing to meet that worthless young Hendricks again! No daughter of mine—!"

"I'm not your daughter!" Bonny's young voice cut in hotly. "I'm only your step-daughter, and I'm ashamed of that! The Bar W was my father's—Hal Fenton's! When he died you took advantage of my mother's loneliness and helplessness and fooled her into marrying you! Then you killed her with your overwork and cruelty because she wasn't as strong as I am. You can have the Bar W! It's *me* Jim Hendricks wants, and you can't keep me from seeing him!"

SO THAT was it! Yancy felt himself tremble at the anger in the girl's voice. Desperation had moved her to the point of recklessness, and the old carpenter felt another flash of sympathy for her. She was too sweet a younker to be handled the way Joad was handling her. Yancy whittled away with his drawing knife, trying to persuade himself it was really none of his business.

"I'll keep you from seeing him!" Joad

Probably neither of them realized that their voices carried to the shed where Yancy worked with his drawing knife.

Woods trumpeted. "If I catch him crossing the boundaries of the Bar W again, I'll kill him with my bare hands!"

Yancy heard the thud of Joad's peg-leg as the old tyrant pounded away. A few moments later he saw Bonny hurry

by his shack windows. Yancy stepped to the door and called out, "Miss Bonny!"

The girl whirled, startled.

"Come in a minute, honey!"

Bonny hesitated a moment, then came into the shop.

"I eared in on the ruckus," Yancy admitted. "This man Hendricks—what's Joad got against him?"

Bonny Fenton's eyes flashed. "Joad Woods has hated him from the moment he started paying attention to me! He knows if I marry Jim he'll have to hire two hands to take my place!"

At Yancy's sly encouragement she went on and on, unburdening herself completely. Probably it was the first time in years she had had anybody to talk to like that. Probably she had never let herself talk to this young Jim Hendricks like that for fear of his thinking she wanted escape more than to become his wife. That was what Yancy had aimed at. He patted her shoulder and listened, feeling the concern of the old for the young, for whom life held a probably brighter future.

"Something will turn up to help you," he said, when she had finished crying. "Just don't crowd Joad. If your young man is all you say he is, he'll find a way!"

The girl went back to the house, and Yancy felt an immense relief. He smoked his pipe well into the night before he knocked out the last dottle and crawled into his soogans. Jim Hendricks wanted the girl to run away with him, Bonny had told him, but Bonny had refused. Jim's heart was wrapped up in his own T Cross spread, which his father had run before him. An elopement woud take him away from it, or if they returned to it there would be perpetual war between the Bar W and the T Cross. Bonny, in spite of her hatred of Joad Woods and the life he imposed on her, was woman enough not to want her marriage to start off under those conditions.

YANCY worked quietly and thoughtfully for the next three days and finished the pegleg without finding illumination as to how he could help Bonny. Joad Woods was enormously pleased with the leg, when Yancy was finished with it. It was stronger, it fit better, and it didn't creak like the old one. But the crowning touch was the stirrup hook Yancy had made himself, elbowing the regular smithy out of the blacksmith shop. It was a clamp which he could fasten to the stirrup simply by applying his weight. It would increase Joad's security in the saddle and with practice probably would enable him to indulge his taste for riding the friskier horses again. This was not a favor to Joad but rather an outgrowth of Yancy's natural instinct for improving.

Pete Morton and the egg-bald Rice were on hand when Joad first tried the new leg. Joad swung aboard his skewbald and managed to clamp the hook on securely on his first effort. "Take a look at that!" Joad roared to them.

Both Morton and Rice crowded forward to examine the clamp. And with interest. Later Yancy was to regret the fact he did not pay more attention to that interest.

The next morning Yancy rolled out of his soogans with a sense of foreboding. He stalked across to the house for his breakfast, and found Bonny alone and worried. She didn't know where Joad was, and Joad's bed had not been slept in.

"I'm scared stiff!" she admitted. "I've got a feeling it has something to do with Jim! I met him last night, down in Haynes' willows. I only talked to him a little while, for I kept remembering Joad's threat to kill him. Joad wasn't here when I got back. He hasn't been here since."

Yancy tried to reassure her, keeping his own premonition to himself. He had just finished his breakfast when three riders swung into the yard. Yancy moved across the porch. The newcomers were Pete Morton, Rice and a cowhand called Whitey. The huge, inert hulk of Joad Woods hung across the saddle in front of Morton. Yancy hurried forward, and as Morton swung his horse, Yancy gasped. Joad's black, bearded face and head were bloody, battered almost beyond recognition.

It was a lucky one on his glass jaw that ended it.

"What happened?" Yancy asked bleakly.

"Murdered," was Morton's laconic reply. "He's been hammered to a pulp. His head's been bashed with a rock."

Yancy felt no pity for the dead man they placed on the porch. His going was a blessing as far as the old carpenter could see. But Joad's removal from the scene was not all that was involved here. Bonny had come out, when she saw what had happened she fled into the house

again.

"Jim Hendricks killed him!" Morton went on, raising his voice so Bonny could hear. "He must've met with Joad, and the sign shows they fought. He must've got the best of Joad and finished him with a rock!"

"What makes you think it was Hendricks?" Yancy snapped.

Morton grinned. "Take a look at this, grandpa!" He produced a hat band from his pocket. "Anybody in these parts'd recognize this fancy little article. Hendricks must've got his hat knocked off in the fracas, and when he picked it up he was in such a hurry he didn't notice the band had lost off."

Yancy went into the house and found Bonny cold with fear. "Probably he's right!" she whispered. "Jim hated Joad as bad as Joad hated him. He's got a terrible temper of his own. Joad must've known I was meeting Jim and followed me. What can we do, Yancy? Pete Morton's itching to pin a murder on Jim. He's . . . he's been hoping to marry me for a long time."

There was movement in the kitchen. Pete Morton came into the room. "Light a shuck, Yancy!" he ordered. "I want to talk to Bonny."

YANCY left and returned to his shop. He sat down on an empty cracker box, stroking his whiskery chin. A half hour later he saw Morton emerge from the house, his face wreathed in smiles. Morton swung onto his horse.

Yancy lunged out into the yard. "Where you heading, Morton? We better talk about this before you go riding for the law!"

Morton's grin only broadened. "Don't worry, grandpa!" He was in a fine mood for some reason. "I ain't riding for the sheriff—at least right now. I'm riding out to send one of the boys after the preacher."

"Preacher?" Yancy asked. "You can't bury Joad without notifying—"

"It ain't no funeral I'm thinking about," Morton answered. "It's a wedding. Bonny and me're getting married up, just as soon as the preacher gets here!" And with another taunting grin at Yancy he galloped off.

Yancy wheeled and pounded into the house, his face black with fury. "What's this about you and that skunk getting married?" he blared at Bonny.

The girl's face had grown strangely old and her eyes were set. "It's true, Yancy. I . . . I promised to marry him. He wants to make it right now, so I can't change my mind, but keep it secret for a while so the neighbors won't talk."

"Jumpin' catfish!" Yancy swore. "Why?"

Suddenly the girl clung to him. "I've got to, Yancy, and don't you try to stop it! He offered to destroy Jim's hatband. He said if we all stuck together we could make it look like Joad got drug by his horse—that his horse throwed him and he couldn't get that clamp of yours unfastened. But Morton'll do this only if I marry him—today!"

"Joad don't look like he'd been dragged—at least his clothes don't!" Yancy objected. "He couldn't have been drug. I thought of that when I made the clamp. If he got throwed his stump'd pull loose from the pegleg, probably."

"Morton said we could fix it so everything looked right," the girl answered, her voice deep with dejection. "It's our only chance to save Jim, Yancy!"

Yancy retired to the shop, angry and puzzled. Something seemed mighty skunky about this. Maybe Morton's only motive in jumping at this was his wish to marry the girl. Yet Yancy remembered that with Joad's death Bonny would also come into undisputed possession of the Bar W. That was a prize worth murdering for. Morton and Rice could have known that Bonny had met young Hendricks in the willow clump. They might have known that Joad had stalked them. They could have murdered Joad themselves, aware that their method could easily be made to look like a dragging, that Bonny could be made to believe that Hendricks had done it and could be forced into marrying Morton to protect Hendricks.

There was one person who could throw light on the subject—Jim Hendricks him-

self. Yancy hurried to the corrals and caught up his roan. He was cinching the saddle when Pete Morton thundered into the yard.

"Where do you think you're going?" he yelled, pulling up beside Yancy.

"Just a little *pasear*."

"Not till you and me've had a talk!" Morton announced. He jerked his head. "Come in here." Yancy followed him into the granary. Morton gave him a long, glacial look. "You're lucky it suits me to keep my mouth shut about you, Yancy!"

"What you know about me," Yancy returned hotly, "you can sing out in church!"

"You wouldn't like it," Morton rejoined. "Between you and me, Baldy Rice and me know it wasn't young Hendricks that murdered Joad. Joad's safe was rifled, last night. The whole county knows he's been keeping big money in it, not trusting the bank. You went to a lot of trouble fixing that fancy clamp, grandpa, and folk're sure going to wonder if you didn't want to get Joad gragged to death. And Rice and me could tell 'em why. We searched your soogans, while you were talking to Bonny. We found most of Joad's money stuffed in your spare boots!"

"That's a lie!" Yancy exploded.

"Think so? We called in three Bar W riders to witness the fact."

"If there was any money in my boots, you planted it!"

"You might have a little trouble proving that," Morton reminded. "Maybe you don't like the idea of me forcing Bonny to marry me, grandpa, but if you don't want to risk hemp around that old neck of yours, you'll keep your trap shut!" After a cold stare Morton strode away.

YANCY unharnessed the roan and turned it back into the corral. He returned to the shop, weak and exhausted. His eyes strayed absently over the tools he loved. In all his years he had played fair and tended to his own business. He was too old to fight a man like Morton. So why shouldn't he pack up and ride away?

Yet, as much as his old bones rebelled, Yancy knew he had it in his power to save Bonny. If he forced Morton to play this hedge card of his, compelled him to try to stick the murder charge on Yancy Porter to save his own skunk hide, that would automatically take the onus from Jim Hendricks. It was to hedge against the possibility that Yancy might do this that Morton had sent for the preacher, meaning to get Bonny sewed up good and tight as soon as possible.

Yancy Porter limped to the corral again, resaddled the horse. He did not bother with Opery and the tools. When he rode away, he did not ride in the westerly direction that had been his general drift. If he were watching, Pete Morton made no effort to stop him. Yancy rode slowly, like a broken man, until he had topped the first low rise and vanished from sight of the house.

There he galvanized into action, putting the little roan into a fast run. He rode a beeline for Jim Hendricks' T Cross. It was midday and he hoped to catch Jim at the house having his dinner.

Jim was there, warming his beans and boiling himself coffee. He was tall and muscular, Yancy observed, and his face might have been handsome except for the fact that it was bruised and puffed. Yancy's heart sank. Hendricks sure had been in a scrap. Yet reassurance came quickly. If Hendricks thought he had a murder charge hanging over him, he would long since have made himself scarce, nor would he have let Yancy ride up on him as he had. Yancy remembered that only on the Bar W was there knowledge of the fact that Joad Woods had been murdered.

"Howdy," Jim said. He was in no amiable mood, but his greeting was civil. "If you're looking for a carpenter job, I do my own."

Yancy returned the greeting. "Glad you know who I am, for it'll save talk and we ain't got much time. Bonny needs you, boy." As quickly as he could he related what had transpired at the Bar W. He saw shock give way to anger in the younger man's eyes.

"Heard you were whittling Joad a

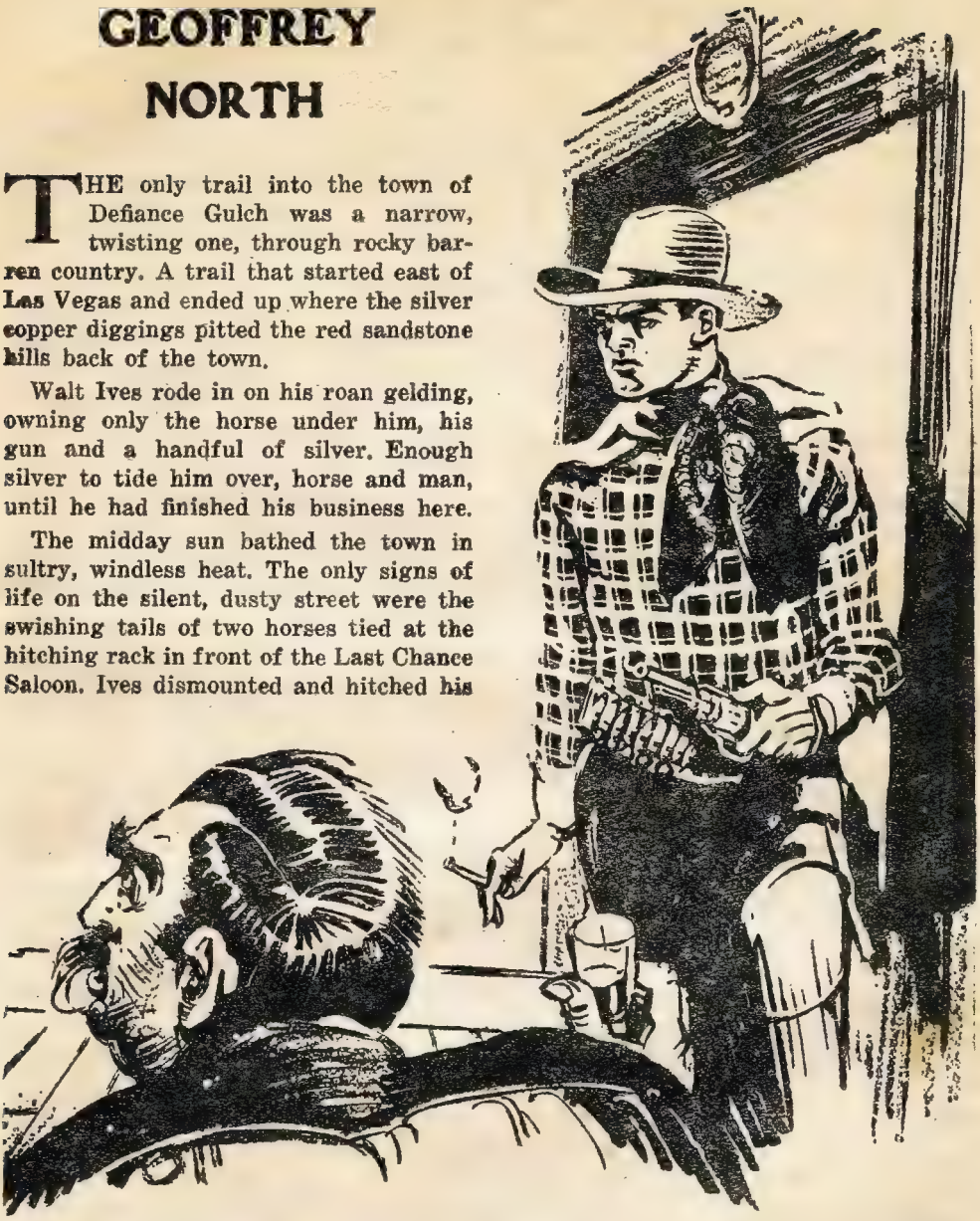
(Continued on page 76)

POWDER-SMOKE SHOWDOWN

Ives' bullet hit the spinning coin. "Save your money, pardner," he drawled. "Those that don't stay can't pay!"

Ives was a peaceful, taciturn hombre, except when his sense of fair play was abused. Then he was the fastest man with a gun east or west of the Pecos—as Defiance Gulch found out

By GEOFFREY NORTH



THE only trail into the town of Defiance Gulch was a narrow, twisting one, through rocky barren country. A trail that started east of Las Vegas and ended up where the silver copper diggings pitted the red sandstone hills back of the town.

Walt Ives rode in on his roan gelding, owning only the horse under him, his gun and a handful of silver. Enough silver to tide him over, horse and man, until he had finished his business here.

The midday sun bathed the town in sultry, windless heat. The only signs of life on the silent, dusty street were the swishing tails of two horses tied at the hitching rack in front of the Last Chance Saloon. Ives dismounted and hitched his roan between the big bay stallion and the smaller chestnut.

Ives had to stoop to get through the saloon door. He was maybe half an inch over six feet two. Hard-featured with tawny eyes, he was twenty-six, but the lines etched beneath his high cheekbones and the long stubborn jaw gave him an older air, an air of reckless dependability.

He was a peaceful, taciturn man, except when cornered or when somebody abused his sense of fair play. He was left-handed, a fast man with a gun.

Ives sauntered up to the bar. The bartender sidled off from the two men he had been tending.

"Bourbon," said Ives.

The barman, a scrawny oldster with a raggedly, dun mustache, slid a bottle over the wood, then returned to his two

customers near the entrance.

Ives lingered a while pleasantly over his drink, stoppered the bottle, then took a look around.

At a rear table sat a man, laying out a game of solitaire. The card-player was blond and round-faced, dapper in expensive range clothes, carrying his gun in a tied-down holster.

A LOUD, derisive laugh made Ives turn his head. The burly, dark-jowled customer at the front rail, the one carrying the gun, drained his whiskey. "What the hell would this town be needing a newspaper for?" he said.

The drinker next to him, a thin man with eager brown eyes, a newcomer to the territory, by the looks of him, said: "Why, to print the news, of course." He turned to the barman. "I thought if I could get enough people like yourself interested, Mr. Yeager, I would—"

The burly man grabbed Bartender Rufe Yeager's arm. "You're plumb loco if you tie up with any fool idea like that."

"Where I come from," said the thin man softly, "people don't interfere with other people's business."

The burly man poured himself a drink. "And where may that be?"

"Kentucky, sir."

When he heard the word "Kentucky," Ives moved toward the end rail. He was a Kentuckian, too, and fifteen years in the territory of New Mexico hadn't allowed him to forget his loyalty to his native state. He wasn't going to stand for any bullying of an unarmed greenhorn.

The burly man rubbed a horny palm across the thin man's face, snatching the new, wide sombrero from off the Kentuckian's head. "When you talk to me, uncover."

The color raced out of the Kentuckian's cheeks. "Put your gun on the bar," he said.

The burly man laughed drunkenly, holding the sombrero up high in his left hand.

Bartender Rufe Yeager saw Ives moving toward the burly man and got ready to duck.

Ives said to the bully: "Leave the man alone," and then back of him a shot rang out.

"Give back the hat, Donahue," drawled a voice from the rear.

Then Ives saw where the bullet had made its mark. Right through the center of the crown of the hat, which burly Donahue was now holding aloft with trembling hand. With a sheepish look on his face Donahue handed the hat to its owner as the blond man at the rear stowed his gun and started toward the bar.

The blond man said, "Outside. I'll settle for the liquor."

Donahue slouched off.

The blond man, smiling, turned to the slender Kentuckian. "Sorry about the hat, Shipley, but that was the only way to stop him"—he looked sardonically at Ives—"before he got too nasty to handle."

THE WAY things had turned out galled Ives' pride. The blond man had put the bully in his place, but had done it in such a way as to make Ives uncomfortable. Ives felt that he had been cheated out of his chance to come to the aid of a fellow Kentuckian.

Shipley stood awkwardly, thumbing his torn sombrero, biting his lip in chagrin.

The blond man clapped Shipley's thin back. "Don't worry about Donahue bothering you further. I'll see to that, Ben."

Ben Shipley colored. "I appreciate your intentions, Mr. Galbraith, but I sure wish you hadn't interfered. It's not because of the hat, sir. I prefer to settle with Donahue myself. I'm not afraid of the man."

Galbraith shrugged, threw some silver on the bar. "Yeager, that will pay for Donahue." He paced a step toward the door, turned and said, "Sorry that I can't stop to drink with you, gentlemen, but have one round on me." With a lazy flip of his thumb he flicked a silver dollar in the air toward the spot where Yeager was standing.

The coin moved slowly, turning over and over as it rose. When it reached the height of its trajectory, Ives' gun spoke.

He shot through the doorway, but the coin quit spinning and clinked to the floor.

"Save you money, pardner," said Ives. "Those that don't stay can't pay. That's the rule where I come from."

Rufe Yeager bent down, picked up the coin. He brought the dollar to the light, holding it high so that all could see the nicked-out moon where the bullet had plowed a dent in the silver. "I wouldn't a-believed it, didn't I see it with my own eyes!" he exclaimed.

Blond Galbraith laughed. He said: "That's paying me back in my own coin, stranger," and went outside and mounted the bay stallion.

THEY HAD some drinks and some talk of things back in Kentucky, and when Shipley turned to go, Yeager pressed upon him the moon-dented dollar. "Keep this as a memento, Ben. And if and when you start that newspaper, you can write about the time you witnessed the fanciest shootin' that ever was, east or west of the Pecos, right here in the Last Chance."

Ives wished Shipley luck in his venture and when the Kentuckian had gone, he remarked to Yeager:

"Hardly the place to start a paper, from the looks of the town. Don't imagine there'd be much to write about. If ever I saw a peaceful place, this is it."

Rufe Yeager tugged at the corner of his mustache. "We have our share of hell-raisin' and gun-fightin'. Reason the street looks so quiet is 'cause half the town is out with the sheriff, scourin' the mesa for the two-legged coyotes that held up the stage 'tween here and Las Vegas."

"Anybody get hurt during the holdup?"

Yeager cocked a suspicious eye at Ives. "Jim Barker, the driver, got two slugs in his belly. Doc Watkins says it's a toss-up whether he lives or dies. He's too weak to talk. Bart Knight, that was ridin' with Jim as guard, was killed. There weren't no passengers. And nobody seems to know yet what Jim was carryin' with him."

Ives wondered if the injured man Barker was the same Wells-Fargo driver that had sat alongside of him during a poker game in a Las Vegas honkytonk two nights before.

Yeager sopped up the bar with a dirty apron. "Strangers don't cross this neck of the territory much. Where do you trail from and where you headin' for?"

"Seven months out from Picacho Pass on the California side of the Colorado River," said Ives. "I aim to see a female school teacher here by the name of Margie Farwell. Can you direct me?"

Some of the suspicion went out of Yeager's eyes. "She's got rooms above the doctor's office. The big frame house across from the mercantile. Bein' that it's Saturday, she'll probably be home."

CHAPTER II

The Suspect

LEAVING his horse at the hitching rack, Ives cut across the square toward the lower end of the street. On all sides the foothills of the Cordilleras ringed the town. The sun's rays, striking the encircling peaks, bathed the town in a reflected haze of deep rose. The midday heat had gone and the air had a sweet, dry tang.

Ives did not notice the two men following him as he sauntered toward the stone house. One was stocky and grizzled, with a star pinned to his shirt; Sheriff McPherson's face was weather-bitten, lean, and his eyes were red-rimmed from having looked too long at too much sand and sun. The other was a younger man with a hard, obstinate mouth. They were both dust-covered, for they had been riding hard all morning.

A group of men, some on sweat-streaked horses, others unmounted, were assembling in front of the mercantile store as Ives came by and crossed to the white-painted house with its big upstairs window fronting the square.

A bell chime had been affixed to the narrow entrance that led to the stairway. Ives twisted the brass handle and started up the steps. In another minute he would be face to face with the girl.

Margie Farwell! He had never met her but he knew exactly how she would

look. She'd be a slender, fine-boned lass with smoke-grey eyes and heavy thatch of sorrel hair and a row of freckles dusting under her eyes just the same as her brother Tom had had.

The first time Ives had heard her name was seven months past, on the day his partner Tom Farwell had died.

Tom Farwell had been twenty years older than Walt Ives. But ever since that

day in an El Paso bar, when Ives had sided with the sandy-haired drifter against three trigger-itching bullies, the two had been inseparable. Five long years they had drifted together through the towns, plains and wild places of West Texas, New Mexico and the desert country of California; cow-punching, freighting, prospecting.

This was how Tom Farwell had died: Ives and he had staked out a mine-site in Kern County, California. Two claim-jumping hombres had tried to horn in. During the quarrel, guns flashed. Tom Farwell got the bullet that was aimed at Ives. The killers got away but Farwell was seriously wounded. Ives managed to get him into a camp. They got a doctor out of Yuma, but it was too late.

Farwell had suffered a lot of pain near the end and he had rambled in his talk but when he was dying he said to Walt Ives:

"My time has come, Walt, but I'll rest easy if you see that my sister Margie gets my share of the mine. She's as sweet-

McPherson said, "I'm puttin' this stranger under lock an' key. Anybody objectin' to that?" Nobody objected.

faced a lass as any that breathes, Walt. She ain't but eighteen summers—"

Those were Tom Farwell's last words, but among Farwell's things, Ives found a postal card, dated a few weeks before Farwell's death. The card was postmarked *Defiance Gulch, New Mexico,* and carried only a brief message:

Dear Brother:

I am teaching school here and am very happy. Write me when you can.

Margie

After Ives had buried Farwell properly, he worked the mine long enough to secure the deed to it.

Ives was a man poor at letter-writing and preferred to tell his partner's sister of Tom's passing more intimately than pen and ink could do.

So, practically penniless, he trailed out from Yuma; but seven months' working his way across the territory had earned him enough to purchase his roan gelding, and proper clothes with which to cover his long frame, and face his new partner decently.

With most of the little money that had been left from his purchases he had indulged in a mild spree of gambling and drinking in Las Vegas. Better to have gotten the wildness out of him and over with there, rather than in Defiance Gulch. For here were things of sober message to talk of with Margie Farwell.

THE woman who opened the door for Ives was plump and in her forties. She had thick, greying hair, level grey eyes and she looked questioningly at the tall drifter whose head brushed the lintel of the doorway.

Ives swooped off his hat. "Ma'am, does Miss Margie Farwell, the schoolteacher, live here?"

The woman smiled. "That's me. Won't you come in?"

Ives loped across the threshold, twirling his hat embarrassedly. "When did you hear from your brother Tom last?" he blurted out. He hadn't wanted to break the news so clumsily, but it was too late to check his words.

"He wrote me about eight months ago. But I haven't seen him for twenty-two years—since he left home, back in Kentucky."

Then Ives understood. Tom Farwell, during his last minutes had remembered his sister only as he had last seen her—as the sorrel-haired lass of eighteen summers. Now, for Ives, the meeting had lost most of its anticipated savour.

The woman snapped him out of his reverie. "Has anything happened to Tom? Why are you staring like that?"

He broke the news to her somehow. She bore her grief with dignity, with grave melancholy, and thanked him for having been her brother's loyal friend. He told her about the mine, but it seemed a matter of indifference to her. They sat in her parlor a time, talking of Farwell's life as Ives had known it.

After a while, footsteps sounded in the hallway and a girl, slender and dark-haired, entered the room.

Margie Farwell said, "This is my niece, Jean. And Tom's niece too."

Ives stood up and appraised the girl's fresh loveliness. She was everything desirable that he had once imagined about Margie Farwell, except that her hair was dark instead of sorrel. She had the same smoky grey eyes and the row of freckles dusting under the eyes as Tom Farwell had had. She was beautiful with a frank, unspoiled sweetness in her look.

Margie Farwell said to her niece, "This is Walt Ives, all the way from California. He was your Uncle Tom's best friend."

Ives took her warm, fine-boned hand. A door creaked open in the hallway. The girl called out, "Oh, Ben, come in, we have a visitor."

Ives turned and saw a thin-shouldered man, with dark eager eyes, smiling at him.

The girl said, "Mr. Ives, this is my husband."

Kentucky Ben Shipley said, "We've already met," and gripped Ives' palm.

Ives squelched his surprise and disappointment over the marital layout by cursing himself silently for a moonstruck fool. Then all settled down to some more

talk of Tom Farwell. Afterward, Ives was pressed earnestly to stay for supper.

Ives accepted, saying he'd stable his horse first and then return.

AS he strode out into the square, the crowd in front of the mercantile store opened a gap in its ranks and two men stepped forward to meet him: a stocky grizzled man, wearing a star, and a young cowpuncher with an obstinate mouth.

Sheriff McPherson blocked Ives' path. The hard-mouthed young fellow stood off a pace, watching.

The sheriff addressed Ives: "Check your reins, stranger. This is the law askin' you. What's your business here?"

Ives halted. "My name's Walt Ives. I've been visiting Miss Farwell on business concerning her brother, who was my partner."

"How and when did you trail in?"

"From Las Vegas on horse. I got in this morning."

Disapprovingly, the sheriff stared with red-streaked eyes at the tall drifter wearing his gun so flat against a long thigh. "Where'd you sleep last night?"

"On the trail."

"And the night before?"

"In Las Vegas. What's all this questioning? Any trouble?"

"Trouble enough," said the sheriff. He turned to the hard-mouthed cowpuncher behind him. "Pengally, is this your man?"

Pengally of the hard mouth said loudly: "This is the man."

Some of the crowd in front of the mercantile came moving up toward Ives. Their faces all were sullen and hostile. No man of them was without a gun. Ives recognized black-jowled Donahue at the edge of the group advancing. Ives said to the sheriff:

"I've got to know why I'm being detained."

"The stage 'tween here and Las Vegas was held up," replied McPherson. "The driver was wounded and the guard killed. Some of the boys think you're mixed in it." The sheriff spat out a hunk of long-chewed quid. "Walt Ives is the name, you say. Now, Ives, take a good look at this man." The sheriff pointed to young Pengally. "Ever see him before?"

Ives stared at the young fellow. "Frankly, I don't know."

"That needs a bit of explaining," said the sheriff.

CHAPTER III

Mob Law Bides Its Time

A GRIN quirked Ives' mouth. "Two nights back, in Las Vegas I had myself a heap of red-eye. Maybe too much. I played cards and liquored up with a lot of hombres whose faces maybe I can't recall now. Maybe this man's one of them."

The sullen-faced men moving up now lined in double rank behind Pengally.

Pengally said heatedly to Ives: "Do you deny buyin' drinks for a Wells-Fargo driver in the Silver Queen at Las Vegas?"

"A man with a scarred chin, black haired?"

"Yes."

"That man I remember."

Pengally looked meaningly at the men back of him, then said to the sheriff: "This drifter here was the last man seen with Barker. I was in the Silver Queen when I seen Knight, Jim Barker's guard, take Barker out of the bar. This skunk here had been gettin' Jim tight, wormin' the information out of Jim—"

Ives cut in: "Sheriff, I admit knowing the driver named Barker, but I had nothing to do with any holdup. I stayed in Las Vegas all that night."

From the crowd came Donahue's whiskey-husky voice: "He admits knowin' Barker! He admits carousin' with him! He's the polecat we want, boys! What are we waitin' for?"

The sullen men moved forward, encircling the sheriff. Some silently began flanking Ives.

McPherson cried: "Step back, boys! Pengally, you stay. I'm your sheriff and we'll do things orderly and lawlike here." He drew his guns from twin holsters. A gun in each unshaking hand, he faced them like a small terrier baring its fangs at a pack of hungry wolves. "Move back!

You men heard me. You can't buck the law."

The sheriff's eyes were blazing. The mob retreated slowly.

McPherson said to Ives: "You claim you were in Las Vegas the night the stage was stopped. Just whereabouts in that town, and have you got anyone to vouch for your story?"

Now Ives' trouble was most dire. For he knew what he could say rightfully of that night in Las Vegas would sound lame and foolish coming out of the mouth of a man suspected of murder. But since he could not improvise a plausible falsehood, he spoke the truth:

"I was in the Silver Queen, as I told you, sheriff. Some little time after the driver Barker left, I went out of the bar in company with two men. A red-headed cowpuncher and a pock-faced man in miner's togs. We must have visited several places for liquor. I don't know the names of the bars, but if I was in Las Vegas I could point them out and maybe I could round up my two drinking partners who'd vouch for what I'm saying."

Pengally, standing by the sheriff, spat cynically in the dust. "Mac, you ain't goin' to let this stinking son smooth-talk his way out, are you?"

Sheriff McPherson hefted his guns and squinted a red-rimmed eye at Pengally. "A man is innocent until proved guilty. Pengally, you don't know whether it was Ives or not that robbed the stage, unless you was there to see it, I reckon."

A MAN broke out of the ranks in front of the mercantile store. Donahue trailed through the square's red dust, his burly shoulders swaggering importantly. He came up to the grizzled lawman and said loudly:

"We ain't never had a hangin' in this town, McPherson. But the boys yonder figure there's always a first time for everythin'." Donahue's weasel eyes beaded evilly, "So we're askin' you to turn over this long-legged skunk pronto."

Donahue cricked his jaw toward the ranks he had left. The men started out and moving forward in formation.

McPherson said: "Donahue, tell your mob—and lynch mob, it is—I'm the law!"

Donahue mopped the sweat off his lips, shrugged his brawny shoulders, turned and, grinning wolfishly, stepped by Ives. He said: "You thievin' lobo. You heard me—you dirty—!"

Ives hit him in the jaw and Donahue dropped in the red dust. The mob surged forward.

Sheriff McPherson's gun leveled over the crowd. He bellowed: "I won't warn you again. Stand off!" He snarled at Pengally: "Stand fast, you fool!"

But the sullen men came on. Ives cried out: "Your own men will be the first—" and then he saw a man framed in the window that fronted the square above the doctor's office, a thin man cradling a Winchester in his thin arms.

The man at the window cried out and the voice from that thin chest was bugle-clear:

"Stand away, all of you, before I blast you to Kingdom Come!" Kentucky Ben Shipley's black gun out-ranged the others' six-shooters. "Back away, men. Let the law proceed."

The mob slunk back. With a mixture of benevolence and contempt at the retreating ranks, the sheriff said, "You boys seem to be forgettin' who's top man here." He raised his voice. "Now if there's any other hombres who want to have their say about this man Ives, or that know something about him—let them step forward.

A man in expensive range clothes, blond Galbraith, now edged his way through the crowd near the mercantile store and stepped across to the sheriff.

IVES had not seen Galbraith in the mob and was grateful for the friendly, sour grin the blond man flashed him. Galbraith said to the sheriff:

"Mac, I have a proposal that's going to be fair to all concerned. This stranger showed up this morning at the Last Chance Saloon and—Rufe Yeager will bear me out—he proved himself a fast man with a gun. But that ain't the point at present. Sheriff, I propose that you hold Ives in custody until Barker is well enough to face him. It seems that way

we'll all save a heap of trouble."

McPherson nodded, called out: "Is the doctor nigh?"

A bearded, bareheaded man elbowed his way through the muttering ranks and came over to the sheriff. "You asked for me, Mac?"

McPherson asked, "Doc, what chance has Jim Barker of recoverin'?"

Doc Watkins ran a thumbnail through his black whiskers. "The crisis will be tomorrow some time. I figure Jim has better than an even chance to live. And that's a damned sight better percentage than some others around here have, if I can judge the mood of the boys." The doctor wheeled and marched back to his office.

McPherson announced his decision in a loud voice: "Boys, I'm puttin' the stranger under lock and key until Jim Barker is fit to face him. Anyone objectin' to that?"

The ranked men shifted their feet and stared hostilely, but no voice was raised.

Sheriff McPherson signaled to Galbraith, who took his place back of Ives. McPherson said: "Fall in between us, Ives. We're headin' across the square."

Pengally left them and walked over to Donahue, who was lying spread-eagled in the dust, kicked the sole of his boot, rasped, "Rise, you black ape."

Gunless now, Ives marched between his two guards. Standing in the window that fronted the square, Kentucky Ben Shipley still cradled his Winchester. Ives called up to him: "Take care of my horse, Ben."

ESCORTED safely inside the courthouse, Ives breathed easier. He was grateful to Galbraith, whose suggestion had given him this respite. But he was grimly aware of what danger surrounded him.

When Galbraith had departed, Ives said to the sheriff: "Your idea about keeping me here is agreeable if Barker recovers. But, supposing he don't. What then?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," replied McPherson.

"What guarantee have you got that this jail is mob-proof?"

Sheriff McPherson bristled like a gamecock. He laughed scornfully. "They'll break in only over my dead body."

"Much good your dead body will do me," said Ives bitterly. "Now, here's what I propose. Get yourself some deputies. Supposin' you've got confederates in Las Vegas. Stay with me, all of you, until I round up that red-haired cowpuncher and pock-faced miner who'll bear out my story of being in Las Vegas the night of the holdup. You'd all have guns. I'd be unarmed. What risk would there be?"

McPherson grinned wryly. "None, if you was innocent. Plenty, if you wasn't. Supposin' you've got confederates in Las Vegas. What's to prevent 'em from gun-smokin' their way into the party?" The sheriff stared broodily at Ives a long minute. "However, I'm a reasonable man. I'll think over what you said. But before I act on your idea, if I do, I want to know what Jim Barker was carryin' with him in that stage. The Wells-Fargo office in Las Vegas don't know yet. They're goin' to telegraph the facts to me when they find out. In the meantime, Ives, my bounden duty is to put you under lock and key."

CHAPTER IV

The Open Road Again

THE generous spread that the sheriff brought for his supper did little to raise Ives' spirits. He was cramped and stiff in the narrow, hot cell, and whether he stood or lay down on the skimpy canvas cot, there wasn't enough room to stretch his long limbs.

Time passed. From the corridor that flanked the row of cells floated the sound of angry voices. Ives wondered if it was Shipley disputing with the sheriff for an opportunity to visit him.

The voices died. Out on the mesa a coyote keened lugubriously. Somewhere a guitar twanged softly and a cowboy's voice, pure and clear as a silver flute, sang sadly about a girl on the Rio Grande.

It was morning when Ives awoke. A ray of sun fingered through the cell bars and slanted yellowly across his cot. Ives rolled a brown-paper cigarette, but having no matches, could find no solace in to-

bacco. Cupping his long jaw in his hands, Ives brooded angrily a while. Then a wild, determined look came into his tawny eyes. His mouth tightened grimly.

Out in the corridor he heard footsteps and two men talking. The voices came to him clearly. The doctor was saying, "I came to tell you about Jim, sheriff."

"And how is he today?"

"Holding his own and no more. We'll know for certain before noon. If anything breaks sooner, you'll know."

Ives heard the doctor padding off. He heard the sheriff's keys clinking loudly.

McPherson unlocked Ives' cell and handed him a telegram. "This came from Las Vegas this morning. Look it over."

Ives took the yellow square of paper, read:

Wells-Fargo coach, Jim Barker, driver, that left Las Vegas Thursday midnight was carrying fifty thousand dollars for delivery to First National Bank at Bowie Junction. Route was via Defiance Gulch. Money consisted of forty-eight thousand in currency and two thousand silver dollars all forwarded from the new Denver mint to Wells-Fargo office at Las Vegas.

Ives handed back the telegram. "How does this concern me?"

"Now it's government business besides bein' my business, Ives." McPherson hitched his belt, ran a leathery thumb over his gun holster. "That means there's a chance for you to be a government witness. I doubt if the robbery is a one-man job—"

Ives got up angrily from his cot. "But, I'm innocent!"

McPherson held up his hand. "I'm only aimin' to inform you of your legal rights, before it's too late. If you're implicated, here's your chance to turn state's evidence, tell who your confederates are and where the money's hid."

"You're as bullheaded as everyone else in this town," said Ives. His eyes flickered to McPherson's holster. Sheriff McPherson caught the look and his hand snaked for his gun.

Ives hit him with a sledging left that landed back of the ear. McPherson doubled up across the cot and Ives unholstered the lawman's gun and holster and hooked them onto his own belt. He opened the cell door and ran down the corridor through the sheriff's office out to the red-dusted square.

Here Ives' luck was good. It was Sunday morning and the street was deserted. A big dun stallion with black tail and mane stood hitched to the courthouse rail. Ives would have preferred his own steed, but he had no choice. He untied the dun, swung into the saddle and sunk his spurs into the horse's flanks.

The horse hurtled into a gallop from a standing start and a cloud of dust geysered up as Ives threw himself low over the pommel and raked his mount feverishly.

As rider and horse came abreast of the Last Chance Saloon, Ives wheeled to the left, down the trail that led to the open mesa. As the dun swerved, a bullet whined over Ives' head. He heard the cry: "Jailbreak!"

With rowel and curses, Ives urged the dun to greater speed.

JUDGING by the sun, it was mid-morning. Now Ives' trail led on through a bleak arroyo which brought him winding up through some brushy and chopped-up hills. At the top of one crest he reined in and looked back over the rocky plain he had just traversed. Three horsemen were strung along the sandy trail that pointed to the arroyo from which he had last emerged. The nearest horseman, Ives calculated, was about a mile away.

Ives was now about three miles out of Defiance Gulch and with the start he had, there was no fear that the riders following could overtake him. His destination was Las Vegas. He was certain that once there he could find the bar where he'd spent the night carousing. The barman or some hanger-on there must know where he could contact the sorely-sought red-headed cowpuncher and the pock-faced miner.

He urged his horse forward. The trail wound through a scrubby growth of prickly pear, ignota bush and rank grass.

Suddenly the route veered sharply to the north through land as flat as a table.

Soon Ives was aware that he was not alone on the flat mesa. A hundred yards ahead of him rode a man on horseback.

Ives could not recognize the rider at the distance that separated them, but the horse was Ives' roan gelding. Ives dug spurs into the dun. He galloped close to the rider ahead and saw that it was slender Ben Shipley sitting not too expertly in the saddle. He haled the young Kentuckian.

Shipley reined his mount about and his face lighted up when he saw Ives, but Ives saw the worried look that lingered in Shipley's eyes.

"You're the last man I expected to meet," exclaimed Shipley. "I guess my taking your horse needs some explaining." He looked puzzledly at Ives' mount and said, "I see you've taken the sheriff's horse. I suppose he must have come to his senses and turned you loose. And he sent you after me?"

"No," said Ives, grinning tigerishly, "I was headed for Las Vegas. I borrowed the horse temporarily."

Shipley nodded. "Better not tarry, Walt."

"Before we swap mounts — what brought you here, Ben?"

Shipley pointed across the mesa to where a herdsman's hut stood screened by a clump of mesquite. "That's where I'm heading for. Here's what happened. This morning, Aunt Margie left the house to call on a sick Mexican kid. After breakfast, I left Jean alone. When I came back there was a note from her saying a lad had delivered a message that she was to go out to the Gonzales' hut—the hut I just pointed out to you. The Gonzales' kid was ill and Aunt Margie needed her there.

A few minutes later Aunt returned. She had not visited the Gonzales' hut and couldn't understand the message. I couldn't find Jean, and her horse was gone from the livery. So I went after her on your roan, Walt."

They changed mounts. "I have time," said Ives, "I'll go with you."

They thundered across the sun-baked plain, pulled up in front of the hut. A Mexican woman, cradling a round-eyed kid in her arms, emerged from a grove of mesquite. Shipley called down to her:

"Has there been a young woman to visit you?"

"No, señor, no one has visited us today."

"Is there a sick child here?"

"No. We are all of good health. . . . May the Señor Dios continue to grant us such fortune."

THEY rode back to the trail where it defiled off into a sandy gulch. The way led down into the badlands north.

Looking back over the south slant of the mesa they could see five riders strung along the yellow trail. And now the nearest horseman was but a half mile away. The rataplan of hoofbeats sounded like distant drumfire.

"Ride north, Walt," said Ben Shipley. "Leave me now. I'll find Jean."

But Ives pointed to fresh hoofprints in the sand beside the tracks of their own horses. They rode north a distance of some fifty yards and here the hoofprints stopped, at the head of a narrow gulch that branched sharply away from the trail.

They spurred their mounts down the slant. Now their steeds had to pick their way slowly through a narrow defile.

Off to their left came the sound of a horse whinnying. Ives signaled his companion. They dismounted, drew their guns and crept forward. A wind soughed in over the pass, which widened into a rock-studded shale.

A woman screamed. Two shots rang out. Something hot seared Ives' right arm. Instinctively he flattened in the sand, crying, "Down, Ben!"

Four more shots whined over Ives' head in rapid succession. Ives held his fire until a man's black-jowled face peered above a granite boulder. A gun nosed over the boulder and spat fire. Ives' gun bucked twice. The black-jowl vanished.

Again a woman's voice cried out.

Ben Shipley called, "Jean, where are you?" and jumping up, dashed forward.

Ives, cursing, ran after Shipley, whose gun was waving crazily in his hand. A

fusillade of shots rang out. Shipley pitched forward, buried his head in the sand.

As Ives ran up to his fallen comrade, a man dashed from cover into the open, turned and ran off down the gorge.

Ives recognized hard-mouthed Pengally and fired after the retreating man. Pengally pitched forward to his knees, staggered up and went forward. He wasn't running now.

But Pengally could wait. Ives kneeled down to the pale man lying in a spot of crimsoning sand. It was all over with Ben Shipley.

CHAPTER V

The Silver Trail

BEHIND a jagged rock, black-jowled Donahue lay dead. Some yards ahead in the ravine, Ives found three tethered horses and dark-haired Jean, lashed with ropes to one of the saddlehorns.

From his look, as Ives came running to untie her, she had premonition of her grief. "Is Ben hurt?" she cried.

When he told her, a mortally stricken look came into her eyes. Her face went white as snow, she uttered one low whimpering cry and started off running toward Ben Shipley's corpse.

Ives stood by while the sob-racked girl bowed her head over Ben's body. And from the south, on the trail above them, the sound of hoofbeats grew louder.

At last Jean Shipley raised her head. Dry-eyed now, she explained what had happened to her:

A lad had come to her with a message that she was needed at the Gonzales' hut. She rode out on her horse but never reached the hut. At the spot where the trail defiled north from the mesa on which stood the Gonzales' shack, two riders had closed in on her. The riders were Donahue and Pengally, who threatened her with guns, and then lashed her to her mount. Then they put her horse between their mounts and all rode off into the narrow gorge in which they were now.

She didn't know why she had been kidnapped and her captors hadn't offered any explanation. One of the men's horses had lamed and they had stopped to rest a while. She had cried out in warning when Ives and Ben had stumbled on them.

"And now you'll help me carry Ben home," she finished.

Ives said: "I wouldn't dare now. But you'll have help soon. Those riders you hear approaching are after me. Sheriff's men. They think I held up the stage. I'm going to Las Vegas to try and clear my name. When the posse gets here, tell them what happened."

She saw the blood flowing from his arm and bound the wound with her handkerchief. Ives turned to his horse.

'Wait," she said. "You may be broke." She reached in her husband's coat and thrust money into Ives' hand. "Don't refuse this. Ben would have wanted it that way."

Among the bills and silver was the moon-nicked dollar that saloon-keeper Yeager had given Ben Shipley. The rays of the midday sun beat hard upon the face of the mutilated coin.

Then Ives saw something that made the blood run fast through his veins. It was the letter "D" stamped at the bottom of the new coin, below the clutching eagle's talons. In all the territory of New Mexico Ives had never seen a silver dollar like this one.

IVES ran over to where Donahue lay sprawled in the dust and searched through the dead man's pockets. He found two more new silver dollars, each bearing the telltale letter "D" stamped below the figure of the eagle.

Now Ives' suspicions were confirmed. He recalled the telegram the sheriff had shown him, telling of the two thousand silver dollars, part of the holdup loot, that had been forwarded originally from the new mint at Denver. The letter "D" was the insignia of the Denver mint. That meant then that Galbraith and Donahue were implicated in the holdup, since they had been carrying some of the loot. Probably, Pengally too, was involved.

Now Ives understood the game Donahue and Pengally had been at in trying to incite the mob. But Galbraith's role

puzzled him. Galbraith must be playing a deeper game. Ives suspected the three men must have agreed on a rendezvous somewhere in this narrow canyon.

Was Galbraith implicated in the girl's kidnapping? Well, that question could wait. *Perhaps the wounded Pengally could lead him to Galbraith!*

Upon the mesa, the sheriff's riders thundered near. Ives called to Jean Shipley: "Halt the posse at the head of the gulch. I'll return here." He ran up the gorge in the direction that Pengally had gone.

The bloody trail of the wounded man was easy to follow. Ives waded on through ankle-deep sand. The boulder-studded shale narrowed. The rock-ribbed walls hemmed him in and cast long shadows over the gulch bed.

Suddenly the gorge twisted sharply to the right. The red trail followed the turning. Then came three pistol shots. The shots sounded unhurried, the intervals between them evenly spaced.

Ives, his gun at the ready, plopped into the sand. Out of the shadows loomed a horse and rider. The bay reared at sight of Ives, then Galbraith's gun blazed down at the prostrate Ives.

Only the bucking horse saved Ives' life. Galbraith's shots went wide.

Ives' gun roared and Galbraith, spilled from his saddle, lay groaning in the sand as the big bay stampeded off down the canyon.

Ives ran up, stood covering the wounded man, who was bleeding at the shoulder. "Get up, you oily skunk."

Galbraith arose, a twisted grin trying to mask his thoughts.

"Now march," ordered Ives, directing Galbraith with gun muzzle at the bottom of his spine. "One move and I'll empty my gun inside you and save the county the price of a good rope."

Galbraith plodded ahead. He said no word. Ives, covering him with the gun, wondered at Galbraith's silence.

SHERIFF McPHERSON broke away from the group of men who were lashing Ben Shipley's body across the saddle of a horse. "Holy jumpin' Jeremiah!" exclaimed the lawman as Ives, prodding Galbraith forward with his gun, stomped ahead through the deep sand.

"Sheriff, here's one of the polecats mixed up in that holdup," said Ives, "and I can show proof of what I say."

"Mac," spoke Galbraith evenly, cocking a fleeting glance at Donahue's body spread-eagled nearby in the dust, "I sure wish you'd take this varmint off my back." A wry smile creased his mouth. "There's a mistake all around. I don't know how this hombre behind me got here and why. But it wasn't me that was mixed up in that holdup. All along I suspected 'twas Donahue and Pengally. I saw them leaving town this morning. Apparently they were in a hurry. I followed them here. I was trailing them, hoping they'd lead me to the swag, when Ives stumbled in my path. I mistook him for one of the holdup men."

Sheriff McPherson looked sourly at the tall drifter and his quarry. "Ives, stand clear of that man, and put your gun away. Now, what's that about proof?"

There was the drumfire of hoofbeats rattling loud up the arroyo. Rufe Yeager, riding a sweat-streaked sorrel, broke into the ring of sheriff's men. He spied McPherson, and rasped: "Jim Barker talked. I just rode from his bedside. Jim says 'tweren't the tall drifter that held up the stage and killed Knight. The man was masked but he was a short man, says Jim."

Ives holstered his gun, stepped clear of Galbraith. He held up the moon-nicked dollar, and said to the old saloon man: "Yeager, where did you first see this coin?"

"In the Last Chance," replied Yeager. "Galbraith threw it to me, but you clipped it with your gun."

Galbraith edged closer to the sheriff.

McPherson asked, "What's all this to do with—"

Ives cut him off: "That dollar is stamped with the letter 'D'. It came from the Denver mint—part of the holdup swag." He held up the two dollars he had taken out of Donahue's pocket. "These also are stamped with the 'D'."

(Continued on page 78)

JERKLINE JOE'S HOLIDAY

"An' this is for me," he grunted. "I hope you remember it in hell!"

By WILLIAM DECATUR

JERKLINE JOE MASTERS rode leisurely into the yard of the Barranca change-station, midway between Los Angeles and San Bernardino, and he was feeling very well pleased with himself and the world in general.

"Hey you, Tomcat," he yelled by way of making his presence known, "git into your kitchen and set the skillet on the stove. I'm hungry enough to eat one of them broomtails out in your corral!"

Tomcat Jenkins was a wizened little old-timer the Banker stage-line had more or less pensioned off after years of unremitting service. He'd come to the door of the adobe change-station at the first sound of hooves in the yard, and he let go with a stream of tobacco juice as he sourly appraised his visitor and tried to hide the surprise and curiosity that was filling him.

Ordinarily Jerkline Joe passed through about once every twenty days, driving one of big Jim Thompson's high-sided

★ ★ ★

For two years Joe hadn't missed a day's work nor lost a mule nor a pound of freight, so he had a vacation coming. But what a holiday!

★ ★ ★

freighters on its regular run between San Pedro and Prescott. Sixteen mules were usually pulling the wagon, with Jerkline handling the single ribbon that guided them. And now here the old devil was riding up on a spanking black mare, and leading an equally glossy black pack mule. Along with that he was shaven and his white hair was shorn and the clothes covering his gangling six-foot-five body looked clean and new. He was also grinning like a Chessy cat that had just licked up a bowl of cream. The sight was enough to evoke any man's curiosity.

Tomcat Jenkins settled the dust with more tobacco juice. "I can almost smell yuh from here. You musta took a bath, and this ain't the right time of year for that. An' ridin' a hoss instead of a wagon seat. Ain't you afeard you'll git throwed?"

Jerkline grinned, and he was feeling happy as a kid. "You're goin' to git throwed and hogtied yourself less'n you fix me up some grub," he threatened. "Me, I ain't got no t me to waste. Yuh see," he went on, and his secret was out. "Big Jim done give me a holiday!"

"No!"

"Yup. Joe, he sez jist yesterday, Joe you ain't missed a day's work nor lost a mule, nor a pound of freight in nigh on the two years yuh been drivin' for me. So I'm a-goin' to give you a month's layoff with pay. Go out and git yourself likkered up, or dance with the señoritas, or do any danged thing yuh want for thirty days. So I bought me this hoss and mule, and I'm a-headin' for the Sierras and Kern River, where I aim to smell some fresh piney air, and mebbe do a leetle prospectin'."

Tomcat Jenkins scratched his stubbly chin. "That was shore danged nice of Jim," he admitted. "But I'm bettin' you don't stay up in them thar hills no thirty days. Fust place, you'll git lonesome without nobody to talk with. Second place, you'll be rarin' to git back in harness afore a week's out. Bet you'll even start to worry about whether Jim's having any more trouble with that pesky Anse Catlett, and his upstart outfit that's trying to cut in on your business."

"Won't neither," Jerkline disclaimed. "That young feller, Bill Burke, who took over my outfit while I'm vacationin', can handle a jerkline string almost as well as me, and he's hell on wheels in a fracas."

Sun and wind, and the inferno heat of Salton Sink, had toughened and wrinkled Jerkline Joe Masters' skin until it looked like rawhide left too long in the sun. His mouth was wide and generous, and his old eyes, deep-socketed beneath shaggy white brows, were a faded gray. As he finished speaking, a frown of which he was hardly aware furrowed his forehead.

"Yup," he added slowly, "Bill Burke is hell in a fracas, but I hope he don't git in any. He's got just about the purtiest little wife in Los Angeles you ever did see, and a fine strappin' son nigh on five years old. The leetle devil calls himself Jerkline after me!" he finished proudly.

Tomcat Jenkins worried a chew off a plug of tobacco he'd taken from his hip pocket, and offered the remainder to his visitor.

"Nope." Jerkline shook his head and eyed his flamboyantly red flannel shirt with complete favor. "Might spill some," he said solemnly, "and I gotta keep lookin' good until Jim gits at least one squint at me all shined up and ready fer my holiday."

"He rid through on his way to San Berdoo last night," Jenkins volunteered. "And that young feller, Burke, came rollin' by this mornin' at the crack of dawn. Wouldn't even stop for breakfast. He looks like a worker, all right."

TWO hours later, Jerkline Joe Masters was still willing to admit that young Bill Burke was a fine fellow, and evidently a worker, but for the space of sixty seconds he doubted just who Burke was working for.

Jerkline Joe had pulled out from the change-station at the conclusion of a first-class quail dinner and with the sun dipping westward had hurried on along the stage road that wound through the sage-and-cactus desolation of the White Sand Hills. He'd told Jenkins that he was bound and determined to reach San Berdoo before dark, but right now Jerkline Joe was-

n't caring whether he made it or not.

He sat the black mare on the rim of a wide, sandy gulch which the road crossed, and his old eyes were bulging unbelievingly. The wagon tracks of the big freighter Bill Burke had been driving moved sharply off at right angles down the barranca.

"Well, I'll be tetotally damned!" Jerkline muttered. "Now yuh don't suppose that young whippersnapper might be a danged spy workin' for Anse Catlett, do you?"

A ground squirrel flirted his tail along a rough line of calico boulders fifty yards up the slope on his left, and Jerkline heard the critter chatter an answer, but he couldn't understand squirrel talk. And he certainly couldn't understand why the broad tire marks of Jim Thompson's big freighter should have swung off down that barranca. In front of it, the tracks of sixteen mules were plain in the sand, evenly spaced. That meant nothing had frightened the team into a runaway speed.

"That dry crick ain't for public use," the man cried.

"Side-crampin' a wagon that sharp would turn the danged thing over if it was done in a hurry," Jerkline mused. "No sir, somethin' has either happened to Bill or he's done sold us out to Catlett!"

Losing even one wagon with its six-ton load of freight would be a tough blow to Big Jim Thompson, Jerkline knew. Competition with Catlett, who'd cut his own freight rates from the standard twelve and a half dollars a hundredweight to ten dollars had hurt Big Jim plenty. Some shippers, though, still favored his Caravan Freight Lines, because they had confidence in his ability to get their merchandise to Arizona. But if that confidence was undermined by loss of one or two loads, Jerkline Joe Masters knew that his vacation would become permanent and Big Jim would lose everything he'd worked years to build.

The picture was not pleasant. "We ain't goin' to let nothin' like that happen!" Jerkline muttered. "I'm goin' to foller that Bill Burke and pick him up if it takes all night!"

He eased the big cap-and-ball Navy Colt in the holster that snugged his skinny thigh like a part of his own skin, and then immediately felt ashamed of himself. "Why dang you," Jerkline told himself sternly, "Bill wouldn't turn against Jim. Yuh oughta know better. Somethin's done happened to the kid. That's what!"

And yet a survey of the crusty sand in the wash showed no sign of tracks other than those made by the mule-team and wagon. From the looks of things, Bill Burke had turned into the barraca of his own accord.

Shaking his white head, Jerkline gigged the mare down to the floor of the wash, and turned the black animal after the lost wagon. And it was right then that a lethal hornet buzzed close past his ear. The sound of the shot followed instantly, rolling down like thunder from the flank of the hill on his left.

"Hold up thar, yuh old fossil!" a voice followed close on the heels of the report.

Jerkline Joe felt the buttons of his shirt strain as he drew a breath into his lungs. Whoever had fired that warning shot had him dead to rights. The barranca stretched straight and barren. He couldn't make a run for it that way, and be-

yond the wash the stage road cut away from the hills across the shimmering whiteness of what some imaginative soul had called the Yellow Desert.

"Kotched," Jerkline muttered, and he hipped around slowly in his saddle, hands shoulder high. There was more curiosity than fear in him as he let his eyes climb the slope, and he guessed that this was the reception Bill Burke had met here.

Along the fringe of rocks where the squirrel had scampered a head and pair of shoulders appeared. The blue muzzle of a rifle looked down at him, and the face behind it was bearded beneath the brim of a low-pulled hat.

"That dry crick ain't for public use, grandpa," the man shouted, "so jest take that big nose of yours on along the road, or eat a chunk of lead. Make up your mind which it'll be!"

"I've already done that." Jerkline nodded with what equanimity he could muster, and he let his hands drop carefully to the reins. "Yes, sir, I'll take the road. I sure am sorry to have made you waste that bullet." And he added to himself: "Afore we git done there'll be a heap more spent. Why, this is just the kind of holiday I been hankerin' after!"

DARKNESS was beginning to deepen over San Berdoo when Jerkline Joe Masters rode into the frontier town. The boardwalks and streets were crowded with as varied an assortment of humans as a man could see anywhere in the West. Prospectors heading for the Sierras or Death Valley and the Panamints halted here to pick up final supplies. Trappers from the Rockies and scouts guiding wagon trains of emigrants along the old Spanish Trail rubbed elbows with promoters and speculators in tall beaver hats and broadcloth. Adventurers from Los Angeles, cutthroats from the seven seas, and outlaws from all of California had been drawn to San Berdoo, for this was the crossroads of a new inland empire. The law was something a man carried in his holster, and the richest men in town were the undertakers.

"Wuss'n Los Angeles," Jerkline muttered. "That cussed Catlett could recruit hisself a gang of killers to hound us without battin' an eye!"

Other thoughts were running through his mind as he rode along Main Street toward the Caravan wagon-yard on the farther outskirts of town, and then as though his words had conjured the man he saw Anse Catlett step from the swinging doors of the Gilt Edge Saloon which he was just passing.

At sight of the old ribbon-popper, Catlett halted and flung up one white hand. He was a tall, impressive man with dark carefully barbered burnsides dropping to the hinge of his jaw. His conservative gray suit and flowered stock were of the finest, and his boots were mirror-bright.

Any man who had to dress that fancy to make an impression on folks was a feller you could most always distrust, Jerkline had long ago learned. But right now he was just as interested as Catlett in passing a few words, so he reined in his mare.

Catlett's bold black eyes passed over him and his outfit. "Well, well." He stepped to the edge of the boardwalk. "This is a surprise, Masters. First time I've ever seen you off a wagon. You and Thompson have a fallin' out?"

"Why now that could depend, mister." Jerkline rubbed his shaven chin.

Eagerness flickered in Catlett's eyes. "Mebbe you'd like to work for me," he suggested. "I'm going to be expanding my service shortly."

"Air you now?" Jerkline found that his hot tongue was getting the best of him, and he couldn't help himself. "Wa'al, I ain't never laid down with a sidewinder for a bedmate yet, mister, if you git my meanin'!"

Catlett's lids drooped like hoods over his eyes, and a dark flush mottled his cheeks. "No illiterate old fossil can talk to me like that!" His voice was loud enough to attract the attention of passers-by and give them the impression that he'd been insulted. Thus if he killed the loose-jointed oldster in the street they'd figure it was justice. His right hand was snaking inside his coat as he spoke.

"No illiterate old fossil can talk to me like that!" the man snarled.

AND the same passersby were later willing to swear that Jerkline Joe Masters' Colt jumped of its own accord into his fingers, for the next thing they saw was the long barrel of the weapon laid across the crook of his left arm, and the muzzle was pointing straight at Anse Catlett's belly.

Jerkline watched Catlett's hand freeze up under his coat. The man's face slowly turned fish-belly white. "Mister," he told Catlett scathingly, "you better take that sneak-gun back to Los Angeles where it belongs. If yuh don't," he added deliberately, "me'n Jim will tie yuh to the tailgate of Bill Burke's wagon when he hits town and make you walk clean to Colorado Crossin'!"

A variety of emotions crossed Catlett's face, and chief among them was consternation. It wasn't what Jerkline Joe had expected to see, and for a moment he was

puzzled, then an answer he'd never considered came to him. Catlett's road-guard had had plenty of time during his day amongst the rocks to step down and brush out the tracks of mules and wagon turning down that dry wash. So that meant he'd left those marks purposefully.

"By dab, he wanted me to see 'em," Jerkline thought, *"but he didn't want me to foller 'em.* He's aimin' to decoy bigger game into his trap—and that means Jim!"

Catlett had back-stepped cautiously, and let his hand drop from his coat. "You'll never get a better offer than I made you, Masters," he blustered.

Jerkline rammed his Navy Colt back into its holster and chuckled. "Go teach your mules to eat aigs," he said blandly. "Adios, Mr. Catlett."

He gigged the mare forward, and ten minutes later he was facing Big Jim Thompson across the other's littered desk in the Caravan wagon-yard office.

Big Jim was still young, in his thirties, and his energy was boundless, but right now his gray eyes were bloodshot, and worry had lined his lean, hard face. He was the kind of man, Jerkline thought, who'd grow with this country and help build it into a great state.

"Joe!" Big Jim leaned forward to grab his old driver's gnarled hand. "I dunno of a man I'd rather see right now than you."

Jerkline grinned a little sourly. "Less'n it might be Bill Burke," he drawled.

"Lord!" Thompson ran nervous fingers through his sandy hair, "that's what has got me up in the air, Joe"—his voice unconsciously dropped—"outside of me and the shipper nobody knows what I'm goin' to tell you right now."

Jerkline began to feel cold. He'd had a hunch that Burke's wagon might be carrying more than ordinary merchandise.

"There's a hundred thousand dollars in gold coin aboard that wagon!" Big Jim said simply.

JERKLINE sighed, and the sound was loud in the silence of the small office. "What the hell's the matter with Wells Fargo?" he demanded.

"The shipper was Bert Quade of Los Angeles," Thompson said slowly. "He's made a pile as a loan shark, and he told me he's sending the money to Prescott to open another office there. He's afraid of Wells Fargo. There's been a few stick-ups lately crossing San Gorgonio Pass. So he figured that if he sent his strong-box along with a regular load of our merchandise nobody would be the wiser. He offered me a thousand to carry it, and it's dinero my Caravan outfit needs if we're going to meet Catlett's rates."

Jerkline Joe Masters rubbed his chin. "Jim," he grunted, "I smell skunk. Lots of it. If we lose that dinero, Quade will hold yuh responsible. Mebbe he cain't win a suit in court, but he can git a jedge to slap an injunction on your rollin' stock that will tie yuh hand and foot. Then who'll be the winner?"

"Catlett," Thompson said grimly.

"Any law in Californy that sez them gents cain't be in cahoots?" Jerkline asked gently.

Big Jim drew a gusty breath. "That's something that would have to be proved. Right now Burke is six hours overdue."

"And goin' to be longer, if I don't git a move on." Jerkline unkinked his length from the chair where he'd been sitting.

"You?" Thompson exclaimed. "Hell, I turned you loose to take a vacation. You've earned it. I'll dig into this myself."

"Which is jest what Anse Catlett wants for you to do," Jerkline Joe grunted. "Jim, you quit worryin' about my holiday. Why, this here is likely to be the best lay-off I've ever tooken. Started off fine this noon with a quail dinner at Tomcat's. Then I come trottin' on along the road until I got to that big dry-wash the road crosses right at the edge of the Sand Hills. And yuh know a couple of interestin' things happened thar. Fust off, I seed the wheelmarks of Bill's wagon turnin' east down the wash. Yup, jest purty as you please. Fer a few minutes I kinda misdoubted the boy, but when I started to foller said tracks, a rifle bullet sorta changed my mind. Yup, and the feller holdin' the piece tole me to git on along.

The road angles out into the Yeller Desert about there, so's I couldn't back-track and give him how-come, on account he could set there and see me if I turned around. Weren't nothin' to do but come on into town, and yuh know who acted almost like he'd been waitin' for me?"

Big Jim had leaned forward in his chair. He knew that Jerkline Joe Masters liked to talk, and he also knew that he couldn't rush the old ribbon-popper.

"Yup." Jerkline nodded owlishly. "Anse Catlett, big as life, come steppin' outa the Gilt Edge Saloon and done his dangest to work me into a corner." Jerkline's easy drawl crackled with sudden force. "Tried to gun me, Jim, 'cause he don't want me follerin' them wagon tracks. *He wants you to backtrack, find them wheelmarks, and foller 'em.* A feller could die and git buried out thar under a dune, and nobody'd ever find his carcass. If that should happen to you, Quayle could claim yuh robbed your own wagon and lit out for the border with his dinero, and yuh wouldn't be around to call him a liar. Askin' damages, him and Catlett could take over Caravan, lock, stock and bar'd."

"Burke!" Thompson said.

Jerkline nodded, and his bony face looked rough as a relief map of California. "If he ain't already dead he *will* be once they lay their hands on you. The same grave will hold yuh both. So that's the way I figger she stands, Jim, and I jest dropped in to tell yuh that I'm ridin' back to the Yaller Desert to bring out Bill Burke and that thar wagon. He's got a mighty purty little wife, and a button that's done tooken to callin' hisself Jerkline—"

Big Jim had climbed to his feet as Masters talked. He reached for his leather coat and gunbelt hanging on a wall-peg.

"Hey?" Jerkline yelled, and his long arms flopped like the wings of a buzzard. "What in tarnation you aimin' to do? Didn't I jest get through augerin' that you were headin' for a desert grave if you—"

Big Jim had shrugged into his coat. He turned his solid, ordinarily good-humored face toward Jerkline, and it was

As he fell, the gun dropped down the open top of his boot.

hard now as a figurine carved from bronze. "*You're* takin' a holiday, remember?" he said without humor.

Jerkline gulped. "I told you—"

A dry smile edged Big Jim's lips. "So now I'm tellin' you, Joe. You've figured things right down to a sharp edge, but even so you ain't looked quite far enough. We'll say Catlett left them tracks stay in the wash for me to find. Well, I'm goin' to find 'em, and I'm goin' to foller them, just like they want me to do."

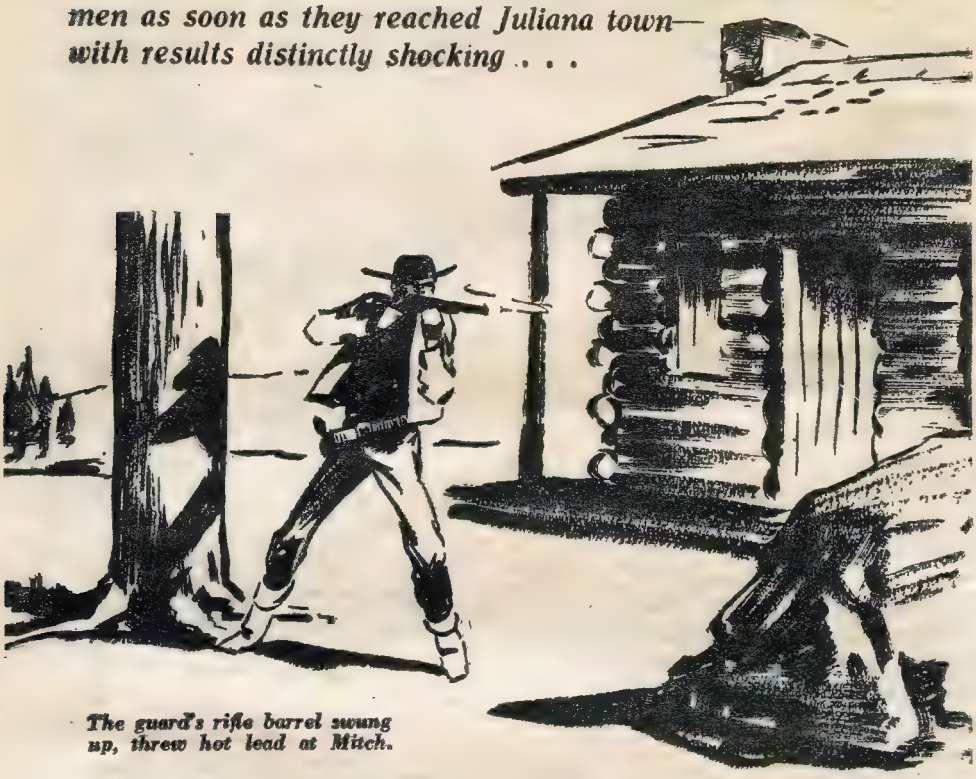
"And what the tarnal am I goin' to be doin'?" Jerkline squalled.

"You"—Big Jim's smile became more pronounced—"are going to be following me!"

(Continued on page 79)

THE BONETOWN

Colorful people, these of the traveling medicine show. Sprightly and odd were they, and bent on a secret mission. Why had the Queen Mine been shut down when real high-grade ore was in sight? What other varieties of frontier skulduggery were involved? The answers began to pour in on the medicine-show men as soon as they reached Juliana town—with results distinctly shocking . . .



The guard's rifle barrel swung up, threw hot lead at Mitch.

JULIANA was a booming place. A forty-foot banner which spanned the street proclaimed it "the biggest town of its size in California." The cold-blooded shooting of old Grady Tucker caused scarcely a ripple, though Tucker owned the big Lazy Queen Mine down the grade at Bonetown. Likewise without undue furor was the blanket arrest of a shabby medicine show operated by one "Major" Stockton Hobbs (formerly Blackleg Mitch Jarvis). Yet both these events occurred on the same night. . . .

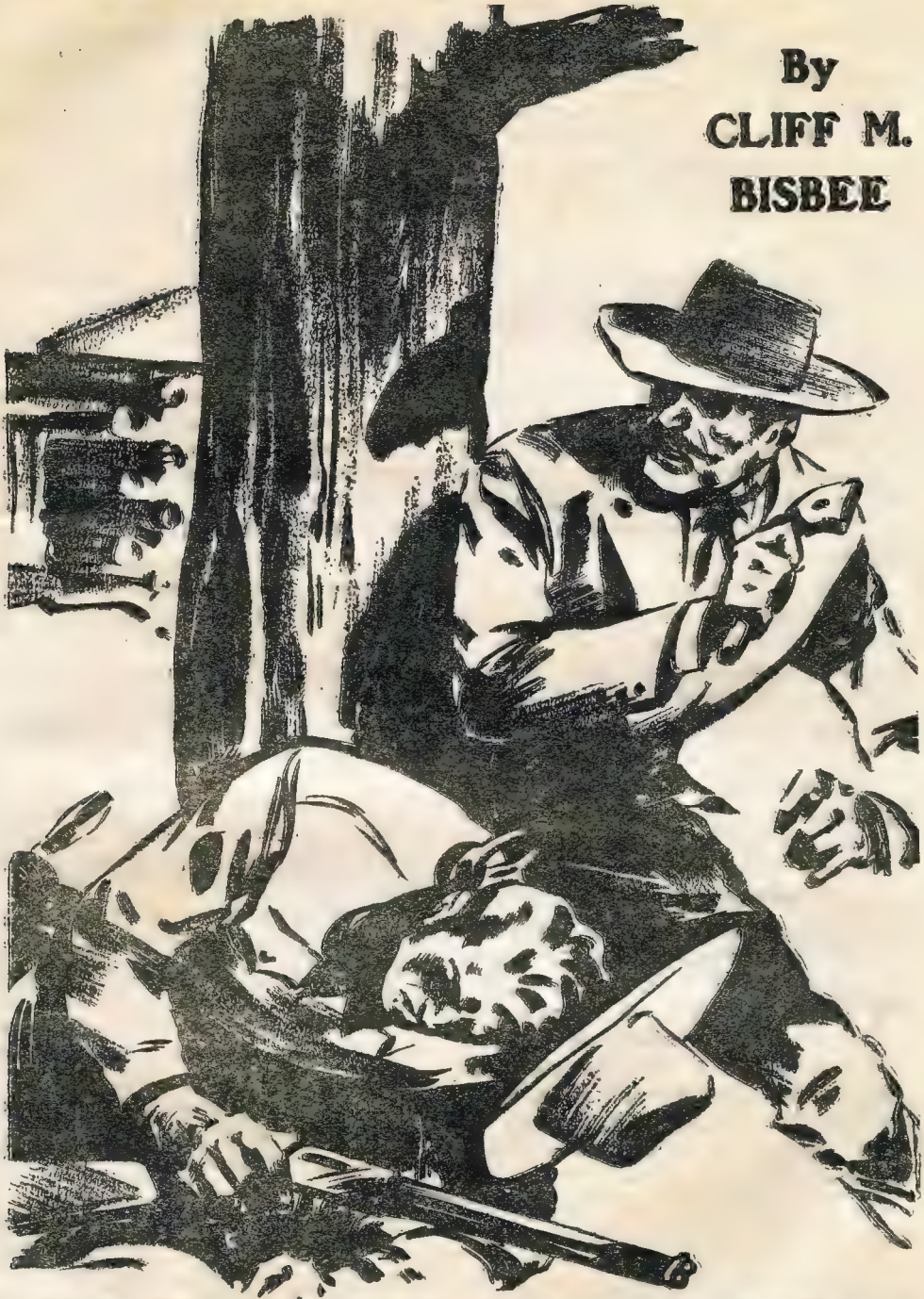
Earlier, the medicine-show wagon stood in a vacant lot, backed against the plank walk of Juliana's roaring main stem. On either side of the gray canvas canopy were signs emblazoned in fresh red paint:

GIANT REDWOOD ELIXIR OF LIFE
Major Stockton Hobbs
(exclusive agent)

On a wooden platform level with the tailgate the Major reared head and shoulders over his half-pint partner, Joe Lately. Beside them squatted an ancient Indian in a filthy red blanket. Eyes closed, oblivious of the staring crowd, the Indian swayed like a Hindu snake charmer while he pounded dismally on a Cherokee war drum.

GUN-SWINDLE

By CLIFF M. BISBEE



Mitch Jarvis eyed the crowded street and whispered to Joe Lately: "Keep your eye peeled for Grady Tucker. Tall fella, gray hair, eyes like a blue-eyed cougar. Said he'd watch for us, and for us not to tip our hand."

A growing throng knotted the walk, gaping curiously. Mitch took on the portly exterior of Major Stockton Hobbs, like a lizard changing its skin. His dark suit, huge black hat and beautifully stitched boots aided the impression of pompous dignity. So did the generously ample torso covered by vest of purest white. So did the coal-black mustache on the square, strong face. Mitch went into his spiel with a flourish.

"My friends, what is the oldest living thing on the face of this globe? Kr-umph, I'll tell you. *Sequoia gigantea,* that ancient and majestic tree of the Sierra Nevada!

Joe Lately, the dapper little partner, had been idly strumming a banjo slung from a cord around his neck. Hugging the instrument to his green-and-white checked suit, he struck out a lively bar or two now, to cover a hoarse whisper to the perspiring Major:

"Snap it up, Mitch! There's a mule-faced juniper out there been giving us the fish-eye for ten minutes. Sheriff or marshal, from the badge he's sporting. Quit the palaver and start pushing!"

"Nonsense, my boy," Mitch said blandly and aloud.

The crowd was shoving closer to gawp at the Major, at the resplendent figure of Joe Lately, and at the swaying Indian whom the Major now introduced with a wave of one expressive hand.

"Consider, gentlemen, this venerable Indian of the Yokut nation. Chief September Horse. This man has reached the startling age of one hundred forty-three years! Kr-umph . . . exactly. We are fortunate indeed to discover the secret of his longevity, long a tribal mystery. A wonderful potion, brewed from the very bark of *sequoia gigantea,* the Big Tree of Yosemite and Calaveras—"

Joe Lately again interrupted to snarl in his ear: "That damn lawman—"

Mitch sedately wiped the dewy expanse of his forehead. Ignoring Joe, he held aloft a bottle of reddish liquid.

"Gentlemen, we have that potion, concocted from a Yokut squaw's recipe—"

The harsh voice of the lawman came loudly: "Let's see your license for peddling this loco-syrup!"

MITCH halted his spiel and looked down benignly into the lantern-jawed face of the man with a badge.

"Show your license or get out of town," the lawman ordered bluntly.

"K-rumph. License? To be sure. As a matter of fact,, marshal—"

"Sheriff," the man grunted. "Tonopah Smith, deputy sheriff."

"Of course. Sheriff. These things can always be arranged, can't they? If you'd be so kind as to step to the front of the wagon, where a little privacy—"

A greedy glint came into the lawmans' eyes. He nodded briefly and headed toward the front of the wagon. Mitch disappeared under the canopy and Joe Lately followed morosely, while behind them members of the crowd jeered.

"Now you put your foot in it," Joe whispered sadly. "That buzzard-head aims to shake us down. You know we're flat broke!"

Mitch, alias the Major, shrugged and climbed nimbly over the front wheel, lowering his large, compact body with care. He turned to face the expectant minion of the law.

"All right, Major," Smith began, with patent eagerness. "Slip me a hundred bucks—cash, dust or nuggets—and the street's yours."

"A hundred dollars!" Joe Lately started a howl of protest. But Mitch planted the heel of his boot on his pard's worst corn.

"A hundred—ah—to be sure. Reasonable. But we never pay over fifty, marshal."

"Sheriff," Smith growled. "Seventy-five then. That's letting you down easy. I've heard of you, Hobbs. Your rep is not the best."

Mitch nodded complacently, while behind him Joe Lately choked with rage. "Only hitch is," the Major purred, "you'll have to allow us the evening to operate. Pay you when we close—or first thing tomorrow."

The lawman eyed him speculatively, then growled. "Well, you can't be that

broke." With sudden decision he added, "I'm locking you up—the whole layout."

Before they could move he had a pair of shiny handcuffs snapped to a wrist of each. Grasping the middle of the chain, he towed them toward the street. Mitch cursed under his breath and Joe Lately wailed loudly.

"What about our stuff? Have a heart, sheriff—"

"With the salary I get, it don't pay to have a heart," Smith grunted. "I can't roll you hombres without risk of getting into trouble. But if you don't dig up a hundred pesos by tomorrow, this time, I'll peddle your junk for what it'll bring. That's legitimate. Costs and so on."

As they went past the platform he reached up and poked September Horse in the seat with a hard thumb. "Climb down, Chief. We're goin' to the *jusgado*."

The Indian came out of his trance with alacrity. He jumped down, blanket billowing out behind. "Whiskey?" he mumbled. "Got'm here?"

"Not whiskey, you stinking goat," Joe growled disgustedly. "*Jusgado*. Courthouse, jail—the clink. The show's pinched."

A good share of the crowd had already dispersed, having lost interest. Those remaining now trailed the purposeful sheriff and his cavalcade of prisoners, whistling and jeering with most humiliating glee. Mitch kept up a severe if spurious dignity, but Joe Lately slunk along, his resentment mingled with a palpable phobia against all departments of the law.

IT WAS the double blast of six-guns that brought the foursome wheeling around to the door of a saloon. A surge of men came through the swinging doors, nearly overwhelming them. Somebody spotted Sheriff Tonopah Smith and bawled out to him.

"Burl Fenton plugged old Grady Tucker, sheriff! Emptied six shots into him and killed him dead—"

"Six shots, my man?" Mitch Jarvis observed drily. "Only *two* could have been fired. From different guns."

Joe Lately grabbed his pard's sleeve, gasped out, "Did you hear that, Mitch? Grady—!"

"Shut up, Joe," Mitch muttered quickly. "And don't call me Mitch around this sharping law dog."

The sheriff was cursing. He fumbled for another pair of cuffs, snapped one end around the dazed Indian's wrist and the other to the middle of the other chain, then plunged into the saloon. The trio of prisoners followed, merely because the backwash of the excited crowd carried them in.

On the floor near the bar a gray-haired man lay on his side, blood pooling around his chest. Over him a tall young man wavered on unsteady feet, staring down with bleary, shocked eyes. His right hand clutched a smoking gun.

"Grady!" The young man's voice was thick and choked. "Grady—I don't know how it happened. Honest to gosh I don't! One minute I was standin' there by the back door, and the next—so help me, I was drunk, Grady. Pie-eyed drunk."

"You're still drink-loco as a pet badger," Sheriff Tonopah Smith growled. "Get over there and set down, Burl, while I take a look at Grady. Damn it, everything's got to come at once. Doc! Where the hell is Doc Peeler? Somebody get him pronto. Who saw this? What was it about? Here, you three grifters! Get yonder with Burl Fenton and keep outa the way! I'll be lockin' the bunch up together . . . ."

Mitch Jarvis stared at the man sprawled there on the floor, and behind his cool exterior was jangling fear that he had reached this Juliana town too late. It was in Sacramento that Grady's letter had caught up with him. Under the Major Hobbs alias, Mitch had been promoting a rodeo of sorts—with deftly arranged side bets that should have netted him and Joe Lately a handsome profit. The letter from Grady Tucker said, in part:

I wish I'd stayd with pik and gold pan, stead of goin in with a bunch of Frisco bankers. With real highgrade ore in sight, they shet down the Queen Mine! Ordinary, I'd rite up to old Sam Biddle and raze some fancy hell. But Sam's on his

dethbed and sent his son John here to lern mining first hand.

John landed here with the shet-down order and a busted nose which he picked up in some brawl on the way down. With Sam sick, it's John wears the brass gizzard. But Mitch—there's somethin' rotten as hades goin on and I don't know what, except I suspect *John Biddle, the spoiled brat, has got a finger in it.*

I'm askin' you to come down, Mitch. To help a old friend. . . .

It had taken tall argument for Mitch to pry Joe loose from the sure-thing rodeo in Sacramento. In Los Angeles the pards had acquired the medicine show, including the Chief and a flea-bitten team, from a down-and-out quack peddler. In Los Angeles, too, they heard startling news. Dillon Karns, a swindler and killer of some notoriety, was jailed in the pueblo, awaiting execution. Neither of the pards knew Karns personally, but the news carried impact.

"Maybe it means they're clampin' down on promoters like us," Joe had mourned.

"Karns is not in our class," Mitch had remarked blandly. "We're not killers, Joe. It's good for us they got him. Less competition, less trouble—more profits!"

Now they were here, for better or worse, Mitch thought morosely. It looked like worse. . . .

A mournful little doctor hustled into the saloon, to stoop over the man on the floor. The doctor worked furiously for a minute or so, swore a couple of times, then swung to the lawman.

"Grady's tough as burro meat, but he's pretty hard-hit. Fractured presternum and pleural rupture—maybe worse. Get him up to the town house immediately and somebody find Canary!"

CHAPTER II

Juliana Jailhouse

THE prisoners found themselves jostled off to the side with Burl Fenton. September Horse hung back long enough to snatch a whiskey bottle from the saloon's bar, then squatted on the floor, disappearing into the folds of his reeking blanket. Other men held their noses and moved aside.

Burl Fenton had sagged onto a chair, gazing with a fixed expression of horror at the wounded man. The gun still drooped in Fenton's hand. Mitch coolly plucked the gun like a hanging apple and thrust it inside his own shire, shoving the barrel down snugly under his belt.

A commotion broke out at the door, where men crowded. A tall man in a fine white hat stood with his back against the door, talking fast. He was holding a girl by the wrist with one hand. His voice came above the confused babble of the crowd:

"Now, Canary—please! Don't go in. You'll only—"

"Stand aside, John Biddle," the girl said clearly. "I'm not a child. If either my father or Burl has been hurt I'm going in!"

And come in she did, wrenching away from Biddle. Mitch Jarvis watched her come, wondering if she'd recognize him after fifteen year, deciding she wouldn't. Grady Tucker's daughter had been no more than six or seven at the time.

The girl cried out sharply as she dropped beside her father on the floor. For a tense moment the room was silent, all eyes focused on her. Canary Tucker was something to look at, any time. Slender, yet with a hint of coming buxomness in her rounded figure, she wore a billowing crinoline skirt printed with large pink flowers. The filmy straw bonnet she threw aside impatiently, to reveal golden-brown hair drawn into broad curls on each side, with a decorous and graceful knot behind.

The little doctor drew her gently to her feet. He motioned to a pair of brawny miners who stepped into gather Grady Tucker up and bear him to the street. Canary threw a distracted glance around the room, seeing nothing.

Her gaze fell at last on the lanky Burl Fenton. For a full minute she stared at him, her little hand creeping slowly to her lips. Then came her whisper, surprisingly clear in the big room:

"Burl! Burl, you didn't—?"

Fenton's head raised slowly. Mitch Jarvis read shame in his strained look—and something immeasurably deeper. His speech was for her alone.

"Canary—I can't believe I shot Grady! I remember coming in the back door, and seeing Grady here at the bar. And then

A pair of brawny miners stepped in to gather Tucker up and bear him out to the street.

he threw a shot at me, fast. Canary, that's the truth! It's the only thing I do remember clearly. And then I guess my gun—" He broke off with a groan of anguish.

"Don't welch," John Biddle said. "We all know you had a deuce of a row with Grady this afternoon. And you've been hitting the booze for a week."

There was easy contempt in Biddle's voice, and in his smooth-shaven face. Mitch eyed this scion of San Francisco mining wealth, and didn't cotton much to what he saw. There was a blue swelling on the bridge of Biddle's nose that rather spoiled its classic lines.

The girl said not a word, only standing there with strong emotion stamped across her face. Biddle strolled to the rear of the saloon with old Sheriff Tonopah Smith, where they examined the casing of the door. Presently Biddle came back and took the girl's arm. He picked up her hat and held it, while he turned her slowly away from Burl Fenton toward the door.

"Grady shot at him all right," Biddle told her. "Must have been after Fenton shot, or almost the same second, from what Sheriff Smith says. Grady's bullet landed in the door casing back there, over Fenton's head. It's too bad Grady didn't draw a finer bead."

With impeccable manners he guided Canary Tucker to the street.

TONOPAH SMITH finally got around to herding his foursome of prisoners to Juliana's adobe jail. He locked the wide barred door behind him and then disappeared toward the board shack that housed his office.

Mitch Jarvis drew forth Fenton's gun and held it out, grinning. "Something you lost, young feller. Put it away. Kr-umph. Sweet on that girl, are you?"

Surprised, Burl Fenton stuck his gun inside his shirt promptly enough. "Thanks," he grunted. "Sweet on Canary? Why damn your—"

He jerked his fingers up through his rope-colored hair, making it look even more like a handful of barley hay than it had before. He sagged onto one of the hard bunks and stared at Mitch.

"Well, hang it. Yes, I am. Canary and me . . . that is before—" He straightened abruptly, lips clamping shut.

But Mitch was already lighting a cigaret, and his attention was on it. "Until young Biddle came along?" he suggested.

Fenton was alert now, his drunk wearing off. "What's it to you?" he growled. "Who the hell are you, anyhow?" His hot, red-rimmed eyes swept around to Joe Lately and the Indian. September Horse had stretched out on a bunk, and now his gravelly snore lifted. His blanket flopped open and a bottle dropped to the floor. Lately stared at it.

"Empty," he mumbled.

"Are all you gents together?" Fenton questioned narrowly.

"Sure we're together," Lately said. "Mitch, why the hell don't you lay down and quit badgerin' the poor cuss?"

Mitch Jarvis shrugged, picked himself a bunk and stretched himself out upon it. For perhaps an hour there was silence. From outside a fitful light strayed into the jail. The Major was occupied with his own thoughts, few of them pleasant, and none of them flattering to himself. It had been a long time since Grady Tucker had plucked him out of a lynch-mob noose, down Los Algonones way. A square gent, Tucker. Squarer than most. The two had become friends, after that contraband incident. Then the years had separated them. Mitch became Major Stockton Hobbs.

Now Grady Tucker had needed him, and Mitch had muffed the cue. Again he cursed himself for fooling around with the peddling when they first hit town. For the chance to wring a few dollars out of the street, he had sold a friend. He tossed in the bunk, bitterness eating deep.

QUITE suddenly Burl Fenton sat up. "Mitch," he said aloud. "Mitch? Didn't that pard of yours call you Mitch? Listen, mister, could you be Mitch Jarvis?"

Mitch hoisted himself onto an elbow. "I could be," he admitted. "Except that I hit town under a different handle. I'm now Major Stockton Hobbs, young feller. Kr-umph. At your service."

Fenton murmured, awe in his tone: "Blackleg Mitch Jarvis. Heard of Hobbs, too. But I never guessed—"

"I'm hoping no one does," Mitch told him. He got up and walked over to sit on Fenton's bunk. "Did Grady tell you he sent for me?"

Fenton shook his head.

Mitch rolled a smoke, lit it, and offered makings. "He did, and I'm here. I'll need to know some things. For instance, about that row you had with Grady today. What was it about?"

Burl Fenton groaned. "Not a damn' thing but cabin fever! We've all been tight as a tick over the Queen Mine bein' shut down. There's thirty miners' families living at Bonetown, below the diggings. Depend on the Queen, these men do. And Grady foots their pay. It's in his deal with the Frisco big shots. When John Biddle closed us down, Grady couldn't pay their back wages. Yet there's that damn' gold in sight!"

"And?"

"This John Biddle. I don't like him and Grady don't like him. I'm damned if I know if Canary does or not. But there he is, tryin' to boss the layout—and the funny part of it is, he knows how! Today, I got to drinking pretty heavy and Canary told me off good about it. Guess I kind of took it out on Grady. We had it hot and heavy, then I came up here to finish off my drunk. If only—! I'll never take another drop! And Grady takin' that potshot at me—danged if I can savvy that at all."

Mitch nodded complacently. He ground out his smoke on the packed-mud floor. "May interest you to know you didn't shoot Grady, young feller. And he didn't shoot at you. Stake my rep on it, Fenton. Quite a rep to stake, too," he added with a hard grin.

Burl Fenton clutched his arm, like a half-drowned steer reaching for a floating log. "I didn't?" He broke off, eyes hot, nodding. "Somebody in the alley behind me, huh? And Grady pegged lead at him, pullin' high because I, like a big damn fool, was in the way! But my gun—I was *holding* it! And it had sure went off recent."

"Naturally," Mitch grunted. "Feller used your gun to plug Grady. Easy to stick it back in your hand, in the shape you were in. Now— Oh, oh! Somebody coming. Say nothing, young feller. Trust Stockton Hobbs. Kr-umph, yes!"

CHAPTER III

In Again—Out Again Hobbs!

MITCH eyed Canary Tucker and John Biddle, through the fragrant steam arising from steak, fried potatoes and coffee in the café.

"Fine food, young lady. Mighty fine. Kr-umph, yes!"

Beside him Joe Lately and the Indian also lent audible approval, though in a different way.

"Obliged to Mr. Biddle," Mitch Jarvis admitted ponderously. "For paying Sheriff Tonopah Smith his little draft and getting us out of that hoosegow."

"Damned highwayman," Biddle grunted. "When next election comes around I'll see that fool out on the seat of his pants. But it wasn't my idea to buy you peddlers off!"

Canary now turned her rapt attention from Chief September Horse, who had emptied a bottle of tobasco sauce on his meat, then proceeded to eat it without benefit of fork or knife. The girl had wrapped a man's sheepskin coat around herself, against the chill night air that penetrated even this all-night café.

"I understand you are a showman of sorts, Major. It happens I'm planning a benefit for the Lazy Queen miners. They need money, to carry them until the mine reopens. I thought . . . it seemed to me you might be able to arrange the benefit show for me, in a way that would pay. I don't know anything about such things."

"Be glad to," Mitch said, expansively. "Kr-umph. To be sure. Right up my street, so to speak. Benefit, eh? But first let me ask about your father."

Canary's eyes showed her grief and worry. There were circles under them. She was, Mitch conceded, an extremely pretty girl. "Doctor Peeler says if he lives until morning, he'll make it. The

bullet struck at an angle, fortunately."

"Has he . . . spoken?"

It was Biddle who answered this. The heir to a San Francisco fortune eyed with disgust the wolfing habits of September Horse and Joe Lately.

"Grady hasn't said a word. Likely won't, for a few days, Peeler says."

"Might be tough if he did, eh?" the Major observed. "Embarrassing for the feller Grady Tucker shot at."

John Biddle met his gaze without flinching. "I don't see that Burl Fenton could be any more 'embarrased' than he is."

"Not speaking of Fenton," Mitch said. He sipped his coffee with cultivated grace. "Another horse of a different color."

Canary Tucker quickly laid her hand on his thick forearm. "You don't think Burl—?"

"That's vapid nonsense," Biddle broke in imperiously.

Mitch shrugged. "Maybe I'm just softhearted. Hate to see a promising young feller in such a mess."

The brief light of hope died in Canary's hazel eyes. "About the show," she said. "Have you any ideas?"

Mitch pondered. Then: "Might line up some local talent. And my pardner and I can pull . . . ah . . . something out of our bag of tricks. Kr-umph, yes! We'll handle it. Booming place this Juliana town. Ought to shell out handsomely."

Canary said, "You'll need expense money. John, you'll have to help me there. I know you haven't come into your money yet—but I'll stake my share in the Queen, if you like."

"That won't be necessary," John Biddle assured her, a shade too airily. He added with some nervousness, "I'm worried about dad."

THE girl turned to young Biddle with warm sympathy. "I know. Sam—and now Grady. It was Sam Biddle who grubstaked Grady all those years, Major Hobbs."

"You and John must have seen each ther fairly often, eh?" Mitch observed.

"Nothing of the sort," John Biddle growled. "I was raised in Frisco, went east to school."

"As a matter of fact, I never had seen John until he came down here. Grady saw him once or twice, when he was knee-high to a desert burro. Sam always bragged John was the spitting image of him." Canary appraised Biddle's handsome face with some amusement. "Grady and I can't see it. Though maybe it's the lump on the nose."

Smoldering anger rose in Biddle's eyes, which he quickly hooded. Mitch poked among the steak bones with his fork. He seemed to be a man making casual conversation when he asked. "Following in his father's footsteps when he closed the mine down, eh? Curious thing. I hear you'd just struck a new vein."

The girl sobered. "That's the most outrageous thing Sam ever did. If Sam wasn't dying, Grady would have raised a row."

"You don't know anything about business, my dear, and neither does Grady," John Biddle said evenly. "Neither, I might add, does the Major here. But there the thing was. Dad's orders to shut down. Stock markets in an upheaval, gold standard fluctuating, Wall Street in a dither—"

He left it there, with a heavy shrug. It had been a nicely balanced explanation—and explained nothing. A smooth sort of hairpin, this Biddle, Mitch decided.

They spent an hour planning the show. Biddle advanced fifty dollars, without any appreciable enthusiasm. He declared flatly that was tops. Canary was quite charmed with the Major's pompous kindliness.

"It's wonderful of you to help us out, Major Hobbs. Bonetown won't forget it, and neither will Juliana."

"Hope they remember it a long time," said Mitch, squinting thoughtfully, "Kr-umph, yes!"

AFTER seeing the tipsy September horse bedded down in the medicine-show wagon, which was now backed into the ramshackle barn behind the jail, the pards found a hotel. Almost absently, Mitch had dug his brace of ancient .41s

out of the wagon. He strapped them around his waist.

"We'll take a double room—by the week," he informed a sleepy desk clerk. "Pay you when we get out, of course. Always my way. Kr-umph! Deuced nuisance, bothering with trifles in advance."

Mitch found a poster bearing a likeness of himself as he had looked years ago.

Awed at such portly dignity and visualizing a handsome tip each week, the clerk handed over a key, and blinked owlishly at the bold scrawl of Stockton Hobbs on his ledger. He showed them his best room.

"Lots of dinero floatin' around this camp, eh, Mitch?" Joe Lately inquired, as they kicked off boots and trousers. "You think the citizens will come through, just to feed a bunch of miners that could just as well work someplace else?"

"Any mine crew worth its salt is loyal to its own diggin's," Mitch remarked, lowering his considerable bulk into the groaning bed. He lay back with a grateful sigh. "Naturally the Bonetowners want to stick around until the Queen reopens. People can understand that. Oh, yes. They'll support the benefit, Joe. With the right kind of advertising and the promise of a hell-roaring show."

"Fifty bucks expense money," Lately said sleepily. "Mitch, we *could* pull out tomorrow. Say around dawn."

Mitch sighed. "You're a good friend, Joe. Hope I never need you in a pinch."

Joe went to sleep promptly, but Mitch lay a long while, pondering. He wondered how he was going to handle the somewhat cloudy chore Grady had called him here for, raise a worthwhile stake for Canary Tucker's miners, and at the same time turn any sort of profit for himself and Joe. Joe Lately would take it hard, of course, but the ticket money would have to go to Canary.

One thing was obvious. Grady Tucker's suspicions, that a deep and underhanded play was in progress against him on this mining thing, had blossomed into deadly reality. And John Biddle was in the thing somewhere, up to his handsome chin. It was beyond Mitch Jarvis why a man born with a gold shovel in each hand wanted to tangle himself in these devious schemes. A pampered brat, Grady had called him. Somehow John Biddle did not fit the picture.

Mitch sat up abruptly, swearing in the gloom. He stared over at Joe, deciding against waking him. Dressing quickly, Mitch went out into the hall. Downstairs he nodded briefly to the startled clerk.

"Can't sleep. Thought a stroll might help some."

HE strode along the dark street to the municipal barns. Without disturbing the Chief, he rummaged in the big box under the wagon seat. With a large bunch of keys that were part of Joe Lately's kit, he went round to the sheriff's office and fumbled at the door. It didn't take long to get in, with the right skelton key.

He spent a long half hour ruffling through piles of papers belonging to the lawman, with light furnished by a lantern well shaded from the street. He found a yellowed poster bearing a somewhat crude likeness of Blackleg Mitch Jarvis as he had looked years ago. This roused nostalgic memories, as well as making clear why Canary Tucker had not known him. He filched the poster, folding it carefully and sticking it into a back pocket. But this was not what he was looking for, and presently he gave up, discouraged.

For another twenty minutes he pondered, then abruptly grinned. "Should have thought of it sooner. You're getting old, Mitch!"

Back at the jail door he managed to rouse Burl Fenton, who looked some worse for his sleep. Mitch talked guardedly of this and that. The young man argued heatedly at first. But in the end, when the Major gave him a fuller picture of the possibilities, he agreed.

"I'll give it a whirl, anyhow," Fenton said. "Can you really open this damn' iron gate?"

"Easy, boy. Easy," Mitch grunted. In a minute the door swung open. "There you are. Handy things, these tools of Joe Lately's former trade.. Now then, Fenton. You understand the deal? The name is Dillon Karns. It's a shot in the dark, but—"

"Perfect." Fenton nodded. "My horse is yonder in the livery barn, I expect. Make it by noon, day after tomorrow, sure. I'll meet you at the top of the grade to Bonetown, by the big rock. At high noon. *Ciudad de Los Angeles*, here I come! Keep your powder dry, Mitch!"

CHAPTER IV

Double Shuffle and Gone!

IT looked as though the mournful little medico had called the turn. Grady Tucker was tough as burro meat. First thing in the morning Mitch called at the big old house on the hill, built by a former mining man and bought by Grady in the first flush of Lazy Queen returns. The house was now used infrequently, as both father and daughter preferred the quarters at the mine.

Canary met him at the door, hollow-eyed but cheerful. "Grady's awfully weak from loss of blood and shock. But Doc Peeler says he'll pull through now. And Major—in a day or two maybe he'll be telling us the straight of that shooting. I've talked with Sheriff Tonopah Smith,

but it's like talking to the moon. He's too lazy to investigate, as long as he has a good enough case against Burl."

"Like to see young Fenton in the clear, would you?" Mitch inquired affably. He was almost tempted to break his long-established precedent never to take a woman into confidence, at the girl's prompt affirmation. He decided against it.

"Wish I could see Grady—your father. Has he spoken at all yet?"

"Only in a sort of delirium." The girl's brow furrowed. "He keeps mumbling about Mitch—Mitch Jarvis. A man we used to know. Odd, isn't it?"

Mitch felt his eyelid quiver. He said with forced cheerfulness, "Don't worry about it. And don't be too concerned about the mine. I have a hunch things are going to work out there. Always strong on hunches."

He said nothing about Fenton's present whereabouts, as the news of Fenton's escape hadn't got out yet. They discussed the show. Joe Lately was already having some posters printed, with rash promises of an uproarious time. Canary said she was willing to sing; she knew a couple of girls who were good at fancy dance steps, and also four young men who had once toured the country with a circus. They had an intricate lariat act, coupled with cowboy ballads.

Mitch nodded. "Joe Lately and I will add a magic act. And if things work out right I may have a surprise finale. Kr-umph, yes! Finale. Depends on whether I can get him to perform."

"Who?" Canary asked.

"Eh? Oh, September Horse. Occult stuff. The old coot's sort of psychic. Well, young lady, I'd planned a ride down to Bonetown. Like to see your miners."

"I'll go along," she said eagerly. "I've a housekeeper to watch Grady—and we'll be back by noon. You can take Grady's buckskin horse."

JULIANA town nestled in rolling hills that were studded with pines. The country dropped off steeply to east and west. The stage road from Los Angeles came up-grade from the west, and on the opposite side of town a steep and wicked grade dropped off swiftly into the desert. At the foot of this old toll roaod was Bonetown, a cluster of miners' shacks huddled on a wide bench, where three great canyons broke from the high hills onto one steep arroyo.

While they were still on the grade, where desert winds mingled with the last lingering scent of pines, Canary Tucker waved her hand toward a great tin shed sprawling down a ridge, and just visible up the nearest gulch.

"That's it." There was pride in her voice. "There have been bigger gold mines, many of them. But few better. Like all producing mines, there have been ups and downs in output. We ran out of high-grade ore almost two years ago, and have barely paid expenses since. That's why Grady's broke. But he has always said the richest veins have never been tapped yet in that big ridge, and the stuff we finally uncovered proved it. And then the Frisco shareholders close us down!" she finished bitterly.

"Didn't Grady send any inquiry up north when John Biddle issued that shut-down order?" Mitch wanted to know.

"Well, he did send a wire to Otis Markey, another of the investors. But he asked him not to tell old Sam Biddle. You see, Grady figured if Sam was dying, he ought to die in peace. They think a lot of each other, despite their differences."

"What sort of answer did you get from Markey?"

"Only that Sam's chances of recovery were slim. He promised to notify us if Sam did die. So we're just been waiting. And chewing fingernails."

"Slim diet," Mitch commented drily. They dropped down the last slope and came among the houses.

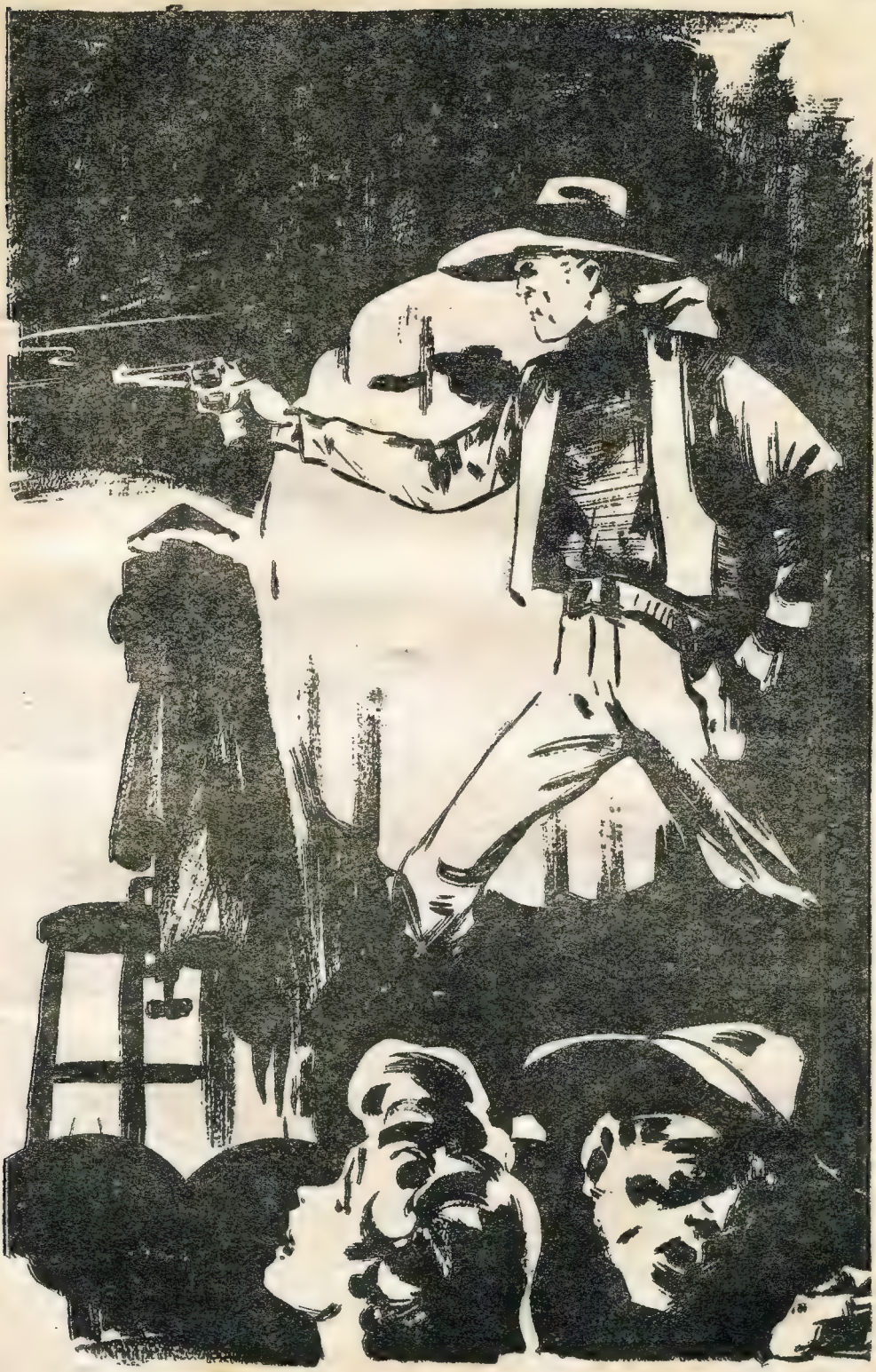
For half an hour they talked with the miners. These men and their families had faith in the Tuckers, that was plain. But their impatience was growing, and Mitch surmised they would not sit idle here for long. With women and kids to feet they couldn't be expected to. Canary ran into a bit of opposition when she broached the benefit show they were planning.

"We don't want charity, Miss Cana-

Chief September Horse pranced into the tangle, swinging a bottle, with an inhuman whoop.

ry," one man spoke up plainly. "What's the matter with those 'Frisco bankers? That's what we'd like to know. Seems like they could pay us to hand on. You'd never get together another bunch of men that know the old Queen like we do."

"You know we realize that, Tom," Canary said patiently. "But we can't borrow any more from the other shareholders. Grady's agreement calls for him to foot the bills here. He had to give up controlling interest to meet the terrific



expenses of development. He doesn't want to borrow against what we have left. And those men up there are hard as crystal quartz when it comes to business. Even old Sam. No, Tom, we want to keep you people here, and this benefit idea is our chance to do it. And it isn't charity. The town up there owes us that much, after all we've spent there."

"Guess that's right." The miner nodded. "Whatever you say, Miss Canary. And don't forget we're all pullin' for Grady. It's a damned shame about Burl Fenton. We liked Burl fine for foreman. Never thought he'd—"

But Canary turned her horse away quickly, and Mitch followed.

THEY rode up to the mine just as a sweating youth cantered onto the level bench astride a roan mule. John Biddle turned from a big Pelton wheel he'd been tinkering with. He eyed Mitch with plain disfavor, but inquired after Grady with proper solicitude. Then he walked casually over to the boy on the mule.

"Wire for you, Mr. Biddle," the youth said, holding out an envelope. "Boss said you left word to bring any message right out."

Mitch let his gaze roam the sprawled mine buildings. With a start he say three men squatting in a shed doorway, lazily smoking. All wore guns. Canary saw his glance and murmured, with plain distaste. "Friends of John's. He gambles a lot in Juliana. Always has these moochers hanging around."

Mitch nodded. They were hard-looking junipers, by any standards. He wondered what their real purpose was in tagging Biddle.

The boy was blurting other news. "Burl Fenton got away last night! Ol' Tonopah Smith just about bust a fiddle string. Funny thing, too. Looks like Fenton just opened the door and walked right out!"

Canary gasped audibly, then bit her lip. She was visibly shaken. Biddle's smooth face darkened with anger at first. Then he laughed.

"Well, there goes your fine theory about a third party in that shooting, Major!" He handed the boy a dollar, after slipping the message, unopened, into a pocket.

Canary seemed to have forgotten this message. She essayed to show Mitch around the sprawling mill, where cumbersome equipment lay silent. She pointed out vanners, mercury plates, mortars and hoppers. John Biddle soon made an excuse to visit the office alone. Mitch watched him pull the envelope from his pocket before he was fully through the doorway. His indifference to that telegram was pure sham!

In three minutes Biddle was back. He lit a cigarette with fingers that shook. He couldn't keep the tremor from his voice as he spoke to Canary.

"By George, I've got to head for Juliana right away."

Canary remembered the wire. "Was it from Sam?"

Mitch noted Biddle's slight hesitation. "Yes, Dad's worse. He isn't expected to last out the day. I want to send up a last word naturally."

"I'll go back too," the girl sair promptly. "I have an uneasy feeling about Grady. I'm afraid we're not able to show much hospitality, Major."

"No matter, young lady," he assured her, still watching John Biddle.

The three loungers also got mounts from the shed. All the way up the four-mile grade Biddle fidgeted nervously in his saddle. When they hit town he was palpably anxious to go his own way.

"I'll see you later, Canary. Want to send that wire right off."

While Mitch and the girl turned up a side street toward the town house, Biddle and his mute satellites kept on along the main drag. At the first block Mitch swung his mount away from Canary's.

"I'll leave the buckskin at the stable down town, eh? May need it again—with your permission. Kr-umph yes!" His eyes were thoughtfully alert.

Back on the main street there was no sign of Biddle or his pals. Mitch rode along, frowning, until he spotted the telegraph office. Juliana was forty miles from a railroad, but telegraph wires had been

strung in over the hills a year or two before. Mitch dismounted and went into the office.

The lanky operator glanced up from his desk. "What can I do for you?"

"Did John Biddle just send a message from here?"

"Nope. Ain't seen him."

With small hope Mitch added another query. "Wouldn't be inclined to tell me what message came in for Biddle this morning, would you? For a small sum in hand?"

The man's eyes kindled in anger. "Against the rules—and never mind the bribe talk!" He flung back to his desk, neck red. Mitch sighed and returned to the street. He entered the stage office next door, and he came out mildly excited.

Across the street was a horse that looked like a bay ridden by one of Biddle's silent friends. As Mitch stared, two gun-hung men came from a saloon. Biddle's pal and another man. They climbed aboard their mounts and rode with set purpose westward. Their pace increased to a pounding run as they reached the edge of town. In a few minutes another pair merged from the saloon and likewise got horses from the rail and headed toward the west grade.

With grim surety now, Mitch spun on his heel and headed for the buckskin. He went five steps and nearly bumped into Joe Lately.

CHAPTER V

Blackleg Mitch, Trail-Hound

JOE was excited. "Where you been, Mitch? Man, you missed it! That cheap grifter Tonopah Smith's up there now, tearin' out what's left of his hair. By handfuls."

"Up where, Joe? What's happened?" Mitch's blunt chin jutted out grimly.

Joe Lately adjusted the orange tie against a purple shirt, with nervous fingers. "Canary wasn't gone from the house more than an hour, when a fella walked in and tried to shoot Grady again! That old coot's sure got a charmed life, even if it is hangin' by threads. Seems Grady was conscious enough to grab a gun and shoot the gent instead, and this time he made it stick. The old lady housekeeper screamed, and neighbors come runnin'. The gunnie was on the floor, dead, and Grady's passed out again. Doc Peeler says the excitement might finish him off. Ain't that hell?"

"It's hell," Mitch agreed, rocked by this news. "The kind that's going to blow up in somebody's face, maybe pronto. Who was the gunman, Joe? Sheriff know him?"

"Seems he did. Been gunslingers drifting into town lately. Had Sheriff Smith worried. This fella's one of 'em. Smith's got a theory Burl Fenton hired him to do the job he mussed up himself. Because Fenton busted outa jail, early this morning. Smith says. . . ."

Mitch galvanized into action. "Listen Joe. Forget Smith. He's a stumbling blunderhead. You get a horse and ride like hell for Bonetown. Get a dozen of those miners and bring 'em back here. Have them guard Grady Tucker's house—and I mean guard it! Damn me for a fool! I should have posted a guard in the first place."

Joe stared at this hot outburst, unusual for Mitch Jarvis. "I got the local theater for tomorrow night," Joe said. "I've put up some posters, and everybody's jumpin' me for tickets." He grinned as he showed a thick roll of bills. "I'm sellin' seats that ain't ever been built yet, besides workin' up a little scalping scheme that nets a double take on every pasteboard. We better leave town about an hour before the show, Mitch!"

"We'll stay, and we'll give 'em a show for their money," Mitch growled. He grabbed Joe Lately by the front of his checked coat. "You turn every last dollar over to Canary Tucker, or I'll take a bite out of this plank wall—with your teeth! You hear, Joe?"

"Okay, okay," Lately mumbled hastily.

"If you wanta be a sucker, Mitch."

"Now you get your horse and ride, Joe. Grady Tucker's life isn't worth a poker chip until that guard is watching over him." He swung aboard his buckskin.

"Where *you* going in such a sweat?"

(Continued on page 83)

Tombstone Nemesis

★ ★ ★

It was known as Rustlers' Paradise, and a bad place for sinners. But when an undertaker gets a corpse—and money for a funeral—in the middle of the night, it's time for action

★ ★ ★

"I told you not to follow me too close or you'd likely have scared these hyenas off!"

By
ORLANDO RIGONI

THE lean waddy expertly pressed the hot iron against the rump of the hogtied calf and held it just long enough to blister the hide.

"Quit yore howlin', critter. I don't aim to hurt you." He grinned.

A cow bawled from a clump of junipers and when the rider slipped the dally from the calf it ran kicking and squalling into the trees.

The lean waddy pushed his hat back on his red head and narrowly watched the rocks on the ridge across the arroyo. There was a slight movement there. He hitched his gun around and quickly buried the hot iron, but he deliberately avoided putting out the fire.

The red ball of the setting sun was in

his eyes, and it was hard to tell from that distance if the thing moving in the rocks was a man. It should be a man. The lean rider had planted bait a few miles back when he was convinced that he was being followed.

Suddenly the sun flashed from metal. The waddy dropped behind the pile of wood near the fire and picked up the rifle which leaned against the stump. He waited patiently for a sign of the man who was stalking him, but nothing showed. Cautiously he broke off a branch from the dead limb before him, and sticking his hat on the branch, he lifted it slowly as a man might lift his head.

The crack of a rifle snapped from the rocks. By the time the sound reached him, the rider's hat was already sailing from the stick, bored neatly just above the rim.

"Some shootin'," he muttered.

Then he raised the rifle and his blue eyes became points of light but he didn't fire until a man's head rose a few inches above the rocks three hundred yards away. It was a long shot. A man had to know his business—elevation, windage . . . .

"Whang!" the rifle spoke. The rider rose confidently and went for his horse, hidden in the junipers.

"So they call this rustler's paradise," he chuckled. The chuckle softened the hard lines of his face. "Damned onhealthy place for sinners, I reckon."

He led his horse across the arroyo to the rocks and turned over the body of the plump, baldheaded man who had stalked him. A bullet hole showed on the bridge of the man's pulpy nose.

"Little low. Reckon I'm slippin'," the rider complained as he searched the dead man's pockets and found a small, flat object which he appropriated. Then he found the plump man's horse and roped the corpse to the saddle.

NEAR MIDNIGHT, Ezra Humes, undertaker in the cowtown of Jackarand, was summoned by an insistent pounding on the rear door of his establishment. He rose in his nightshirt muttering curses as his bony fingers lit the lamp and jerked the night cap off his high-domed head.

"I've told them mavericks not to come hustlin' me at night unless it was urgent. Ain't no reason . . . ."

He had opened the door and stood dismayed to see a lean rider leading another horse on which was strapped a body. Humes blinked as the yellow light etched the slack features of the dead man. He was about to gasp a name, but thought better of it.

"You're the undertaker, ain't you, sir?" the lean rider asked smoothly, and the lamplight glowed dully on his red hair.

"What do you want with me at this time of night?" Ezra Humes demanded impatiently.

"Reckon I don't want nothin', but my friend and the other nag sure would like to do business with you. I want you to give him yore classiest funeral. First-class box with paint an' padding inside an' a brass nameplate."

Hume's eyes narrowed shrewdly, making his pointed nose look more like a beak.

"I usually have only one kind of box, mister. Ain't nothin' fancy. But I did have a special casket made up for Tony Kane before he had the gunfight with Mazarek. Kane double-crossed me by comin' off the winner. It ain't got no paddin' but I could cut up some drapes I ain't got no use for. Jensen, the blacksmith, could make a nameplate of iron . . . ."

"Make it good," the rider interrupted Hume's long speech. "If you can get flowers, get 'em. What do you figure the whole shebang would be worth?"

"You want preachin' an' mebbe some songs?"

"Sure. Organ music."

Ezra scratched his scraggy head and his milky eyes half closed. "It's goin' to be a lot of work," he hazarded.

"I'm willin' to pay," the rider stated.

"Say three hundred dollars," Ezra suggested.

THE RIDER pulled a roll of money from the pocket of his levis big enough to choke a cow and began peeling off bills. Ezra Hume's eyes grew big with avarice. Then something ticked inside of

He turned over the body of the man who had stalked him. "A little low," he complained. "Guess I'm slippin'."

him and he thought of other things than doing business, however profitable.

"Wait a minute," he said, lifting the lamp high while the wind whipped the nightshirt about his skinny legs. "How come you're so anxious to bury this gent? I happen to know who he is. Friend of yours?"

The rider shook his head and said solemnly, "He just happened to remind me of a pard I had once whose body was ate up by coyotes because I neglected to bury it. I figger this ought to make up to my conscience . . . ."

"Ever been in Jackarand before?" Ezra asked sharply.

"Nope."

"Well let me tell you something. Hell's been goin' on around here for some time. Long-ropers are playin' hell with the calf crop. Ain't no stagecoach safe if it's got anything worth stealin' on board. Now you ride in with one of the town's most prominent citizens strapped on the back of a cayuse, an' ask me to bury him. To me it looks like murder. I aim to call the sheriff."

"What sheriff? The one who can't stop the rustlers and stage robbers?"

"Hipple is a honest lawman. He just ain't had nothin' to work on. Been a couple of U. S. marshals come up from the county seat at Ludlow, but they was killed afore they got far. I reckon I ought to hold you . . . ."

"How?"

Ezra smirked.

"Do you want this dinero for the funeral, or not?" The cowboy asked.

Ezra's eyes gloated on the money in the cowboy's fist. Ezra shrugged. "Shore. I'm a business man. You'll be at the shindig of course?"

"I ain't positive. But there'll be a granite headstone delivered here in a couple of days which is to be put at the head of this hombre's grave. That's part o' your job, savvy?"

Ezra nodded. "I reckon I know my business, younker."

Ezra took the corpse and the money. When the lean rider had disappeared, Ezra put on his pants and hurried over to the hotel. In a room on the second floor, he shook awake the man snoring in the bed.

"Wake up, Paddy," Ezra said in a hushed tone.

Paddy Long sat up, rubbing his eyes. He had yellow hair and the face of a preacher, but his eyes had a mean streak in them.

"What the hell you want at this time o' night?" he complained.

Ezra told all that had happened, and taking out he rolls of money the rider had paid him, he peeled off half and gave it to Paddy Long.

"You get the boys lined up. Mebbe you can scare up some flowers. We'll hold the funeral in the Ace Saloon, as it's the only place with a piano. Rufe can sing, an' you can do a little preachin'. But tell the boys to have their guns handy. I reckon this funeral is a blind for something else. Mebbe this night-rider aims to rob the bank or somethin' whilst the funeral is goin' on. I can't figger no other reason why a man would throw away money on the worthless carcass of Sam Mathews," Ezra said.

Paddy Long yawned, but his eyes were sharp. "Sam wasn't such a bad cuss. A little too anxious to outshine the rest of us, but ready to do his part."

"Okay. Sam's goin' to have the dingest funeral this town has ever seen," Ezra predicted. "But it's best to be prepared in case of a trick."

EZRA LIVED up to his bargain. Garbed in somber black, he took charge of the proceedings in the Ace Saloon. The place was crowded, and the painted casket, the lid open to reveal the ornate lining of satin Ezra had fashioned from the discarded drapes, was banked about with sage blossoms and cactus roses.

Sheriff Hipple, stalking up and down behind the crowd on his bowed legs, roared that the whole thing was a farce and that if Ezra had held the man who had paid for the nonsense they would have had the answer to the rustling and thieving on the Jackarand range.

Paddy Long's solemn preaching drowned out the sheriff and then Rufe

Lucas sang *Rock of Ages* in his rusty tenor while Whitey stroked the out-of-tune piano with pious fingers.

There were four men with guns on their lean hips guarding the door, and two lookouts were posted outside where they could watch the bank. But nothing interfered with the services. The casket was loaded on Ezra's dilapidated hearse, which was draped with faded bunting, and the crowd marched solemnly to Boothill at the upper end of the town.

Ezra was troubled as he rode the hearse back from the graveyard. The four gunnies who had guarded the door of the saloon rode their horses behind the hearse, and the sheriff rode in the seat with Ezra.

Ezra had been sure the funeral was a trick to mask some job the lean visitor of the night had wanted to get done while the town was being amused. But nothing had happened.

Hipple, his scarred, bony face flushed with wrath, growled, "Why the hell didn't you hold that hombre, Ezra? I was just beginnin' to believe, like some other folks, that the thievin' an' killin' around here was the work of some of the men in town. But this crazy business has me confused. If you had turned that hombre over to me . . . ."

Ezra, impatient with the sheriff's nagging, flared up, "How was I to hold him? I ain't no sheriff. I'm an undertaker. I tend to my business, you tend to yours!"

AS EZRA and the sheriff dismounted from the hearse before the gray front of the undertaking parlor, a Studebaker farm wagon creaked up the road pulled by two fat work horses. The driver of the team sat slouched in the seat. He wore blue jeans and a frayed straw hat. He looked little more than a kid, but his hands had a deft sure grip on the ribbons. Next to the driver sat a short, fat Mexican who looked like a bundle of rags. In the bed of the wagon was a big object covered with a tarpaulin.

The driver stopped in a cloud of dust, and looked up through gold-rimmed specs. A friendly grin split his freckled face.

"Reckon you're the undertaker," he said to Ezra, indicating the hearse.

"Yep," Ezra snapped, half curious and half annoyed.

"I was told to deliver this headstone to you," the driver said, climbing over the seat and slipping the tarp from a gleaming chunk of granite. "It's C.O.D. two hundred dollars."

"What!" Ezra barked, his scrawny body stiffening while his eyes appraised the stone. There was no doubt that the headstone was worth two hundred dollars. It weighed at least two tons. There was a circle cut in the face of it surrounding crossed six-guns. Underneath above an olive branch was engraved: *Rest In Peace.* But Ezra had no intention of spending even five cents on the memory of Sam Mathews. If Sam had done the right thing, he wouldn't have been killed.

"I was told to collect two hundred dollars," the driver repeated.

"That stone's been paid for," Ezra snapped.

The driver shook his head. "I'm Luke Reeves. I can read an' write some. See, here's the bill."

Ezra studied the piece of paper and handed it back. "You can take that rock home with you, son. I ain't payin' for it."

The driver shrugged. "Reckon that's what I'll have to do. But first I got some business at the bank."

"The bank's been closed for two hours," Sheriff Hipple cut in. "It's late, younker."

The kid's tired mouth drooped. "If you see the banker, tell him I got a draft on him from Roberts an' Hinkle in Ludlow for two thousand dollars in gold."

"You mean you're goin' to take that much money back in the wagon with you?" Ezra inquired, his watery eyes drawing close.

The kid grinned. "Sure. Ain't nobody trusts the stage from here no more. The robbers won't suspect me of havin' any money. Anyway," he added as though it clinched the argument, "Esteban has a gun."

The fat Mex, the driver's companion, proudly displayed an old single-action .44 with the ear broken off the hammer.

The sheriff, hiding his smile, put a

(Continued on page 90)

As he pitched forward, it was plain that he never would feel the flames.

THERE was a rider coming fast along the well-worn road from Fabersville. Luke Faber saw the figure as he climbed to the rim of the big irrigation canal that had come to be known as Faber's Folly throughout Colorado and the nation. Tall, in laced engineer's boots and whipcord breeches, he paused on the rim of the cut and shaded his eyes, trying to identify the approaching horseman.

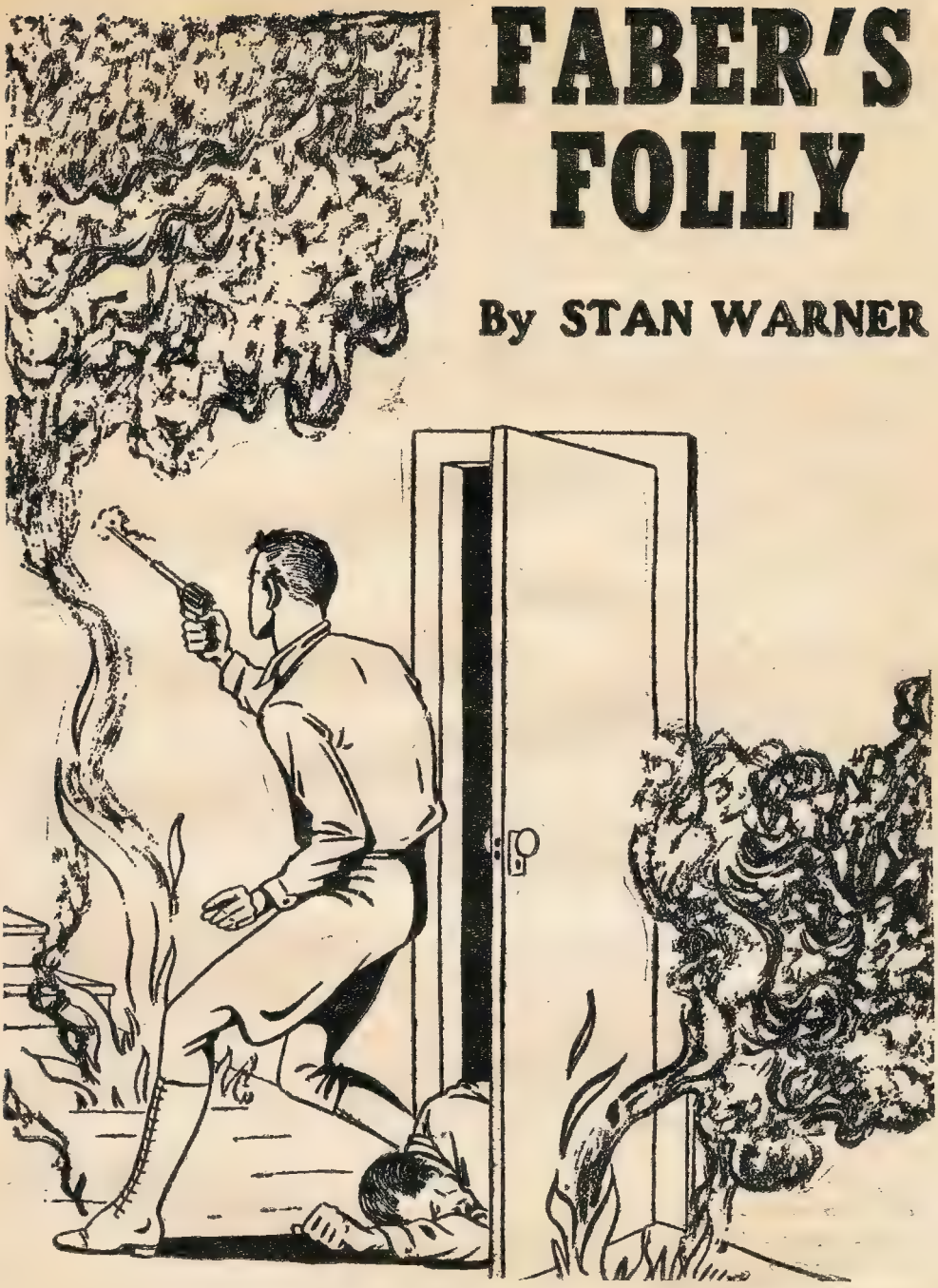
"He's in a gosh-awful hurry," Luke grunted, and he felt something like a fist knot tightly in his stomach. Riders in a rush usually spelled trouble, and the settlers of Fabersville had faced more than enough of that in the past two years. The thought turned Luke's eyes back to the great ditch where men and mules labored with Fresno scrapers and plows driving forward yard by yard toward the Seton Plains on ahead. Soon, he thought a little grimly, people would quit calling this project Faber's Folly for the fine day was coming when water would turn these greasewood flats into fertile fields. Yes, that would be a great day for Will Faber, his dad, Luke thought.

The hoofbeats of the nearing horse brought Luke's gray-green eyes back to the road and involuntarily he stiffened. The rider of the racing black mount was a girl.

"Molly!" he ejaculated aloud. "Molly McCray." Her father, old Colonel Bill, had been one to scoff the loudest at Will Faber's plan to irrigate the plains.

FABER'S FOLLY

By STAN WARNER



★ ★ ★

"I stood on the hill," the dying man was saying, "and I saw below me sage-brush and cactus fighting to draw moisture from earth that held none. And a Great Voice whispered to me, "Here is your work, Will Faber. . . ."

★ ★ ★

The girl had evidently spotted him standing alone on the rim of the cut, for Luke saw her mount swing, and come straight toward him across the arid flat.

In seconds she was reining in and staring up at him. The speed of her ride had tousled her black hair and brought high color to her cheeks and full lips. The time had been, Luke thought, when he'd hoped that some day he might be able to ask Molly McCray to change her name to Faber, but that dream had faded. A sod-bust engineer had no right to dream such dreams about the daughter of a Cattle Pool king. And then he caught the tragic look in her eyes.

"Molly," he began.

"Luke," she cut in, "get your horse. Your father is dying! He—"

"Dad, dying?"

MOLLY watched Luke stiffen like a figure turned into stone. A statue carved on big, bold lines. A man with unruly roan hair, broad forehead, Roman nose, and wide flat lips that could be stern or smiling. A brown shirt cased shoulders axe-handle wide that tapered to a powerful waist banded by a slanting gunbelt. There were women who called Faber handsome, and there were men who called him ruthless. Both were right.

Luke's eyes found the girl for an instant, then he was whirling, hands cupping his lips. "Paddy," he yelled down to his foreman in the dusty trench below, "bring Whipper up here."

He watched O'Rourke wave acknowledgement, and then he swung back to the cattleman's daughter. That morning, when he'd left their Fabersville home his father had been as hail and hearty as any man of fifty. Now—

"Molly," Luke said, and his voice was harsher than he realized, "start right at the beginning."

"I rode into Babylon this afternoon to do some shopping, and as I pulled up in front of *The Colorado House* your father stepped out to the porch, and—and just keeled over.

"Doc Grubber was coming down the walk, only a hundred feet or so away, and I hailed him. Between us we got your father upstairs to a room. He—he's there now, and the doctor says he may go at any moment. It was a sudden heart attack, Doc Grubber told me. He says that sometimes the healthiest men of his age are stricken. So I—"

Paddy O'Rourke, leading Luke's bay gelding, Whipper, came over the rim of the cut. His red face was streaked with sweat, and dirt, and concern. "What's it, son?" he asked.

"Dad," Luke jerked out, and his lips felt stiff as iron, "dying in Babylon's *Colorado House*."

"*The Colorado House?*" Paddy's blue eyes bulged. "Why, the divil take me, your dad has niver set foot in Babylon since the day Fabersville was laid out, let alone that hub of hell, *The Colorado House*."

"Well, he's there now," Molly McCray's own Irish temper was beginning to flash in her dark eyes, "and I'll thank you not to talk about our town that way! Just because it favors cowpokes to sod-busters—"

Luke swung to Whipper's saddle, and questions blazed through his mind like sparks from an emery wheel, but all he said was, "Let's go, Molly," and his flat-heeled boots struck the bay's flanks.

The cool breeze whipped up by the speed of their ride brought some order to his mind, but it was still hard to believe that his father lay dying. Better, Luke thought grimly, for him to wonder why Will Faber had been in Babylon and *The Colorado House*. For as Paddy had said, Will had never set foot in the Seton plains cattle-town since the day their own community had been founded. A man of strong faith, he'd had no use for whisky, and he'd discouraged the opening of saloons in Fabersville. So only something of the gravest importance could have taken him there, Luke realized, and he prayed with sudden grim fervor that Will's life might be spared until he could answer at least that one question.

AND AT FIRST, Luke thought that his request might be granted, for his father was still alive when he entered the room where Molly and the medico

had carried him. Dr. Grubber who served both communities impartially was beside the bed where his father lay, and at sight of Luke he shook his head soberly.

"Dad," Luke said, and he pushed his big, dirt-stained hands into his pants pocket so that Will Faber couldn't see their sudden trembling, "Molly brought word out to The Ditch that you were here. So I—" and then Luke quit talking for he could see that his father wasn't listening.

That morning Will Faber's face had been full and florid with abounding health. Now it was gray, and somehow sunken. His lips were blue, and his eyes were open, but they did not see his son, for Will Faber was living a dream.

"I stood on the hills," he was saying in a voice deep-timbered as the tones of some ancient bell, "and I saw below me sage-brush and cactus fighting to draw moisture from earth that held none. And then I saw that picture fade, and behold the valley was rich with crops of grain, and fruit trees cast their shade on fallow ground.

"Yes, I saw that vision, and a Great Voice whispered to me: *"Here is your work, Will Faber.* You will bring water to the Seton Plains, and you will make them grow green—"

Three hundred families had followed Will Faber west to Colorado as the children of Hamlin town had followed the pipes of the Pied Piper.

But now was no time to think of the past history of the colony and of the troubles that had beset it, Luke thought, for this was the greatest calamity of all. His father's guiding spirit had kept the colony going through troublous years. If Will Faber should die now with success not miles but merely yards away, there'd be no telling the reaction of Fabersville folk. He shut his mind to the future. The present was all that counted now, and there was a question that had to be answered.

"Dad—" he began again, and the old man on the bed lifted eyes that for a moment had the gleam of sanity in their depths.

"Why, son," Will Faber blinked. "What you doing here? Your place is out at The Ditch. They're not going to be calling it Faber's Folly much longer, unless Treet —unless Treet—"

Luke saw his father's brow cloud, and he said, "Treet?" Treet Andrews was the treasurer of Faber's Colony Company. "What about him, dad?"

But his father's mind had wandered again. "Horace Greeley was my friend," his voice sounded remote as his thoughts, "and I took his advice and journeyed West, and I found this valley, and saw the vision of flourishing fields. I came home to Indiana, and told my friends and neighbors what I had seen, and I wrote Horace, and his paper carried my letter. They were interested because this plan of mine to bring water to the desert was the first of its kind—"

Will Faber was living in the past, Luke realized, but at any moment his father's wandering mind might catch up with the present, for now there were two mysteries that needed settling instead of one. Why he'd come here was one. And his mention of Treet Andrews at this time was another.

"Faber's Folly," his father's voice was little more than a whisper as he spoke again. "Nay, nay they will not be calling it that for long unless I have failed—"

"You haven't failed," Luke said, and his voice sounded rough in his own ears. "We're almost to Jeff Tuttle's place, and the laterals start there."

"No!" Will Faber tried to lift himself from his pillow, and his hollow eyes seemed to take fire. "No, son. You've got to stop—" He dropped back on his pillow, and the doctor who had remained silent all this time sprang from his chair, but he was no quicker to reach Will Faber's side than his son.

"Dad," Luke said raggedly, "what do you mean?"

Will Faber was dying. The gray mantle of death was spreading over his features. Luke could see it coming, and a regret that he would never be able to forget filled him. Will Faber had lived through heartbreak and hell, pushing his dream with single-minded purpose, and now with success so near Death had to call

for him. It was not right. It could not be called justice. The Good God in Heaven did not let things like this happen. He stared mutely across the bed at Dr. Grubber, and the medico shook his head as his fingers delicately touched the stricken man's pulse.

But Will Faber was not dead yet. A single spark still lived in his body, and his eyes opened again. "My son," he said, and his words were measured and strong, "I am going to meet Our Father. Do not grieve for me. The pleasure will be mine. It is you and the rest I leave behind who will suffer unless you find—" His voice broke as abruptly as it had begun, and Luke felt his father's body go slack beneath his hand.

"He's dead, son," Dr. Grubber said simply.

Luke lifted his head, and his green-gray eyes were hard as bright bits of stone. "Dad," he said as simply, "won't ever die. He'll always live in the hearts of his people. I hope I'm able to finish the chore he started!"

CHAPTER II

Death Calls Twice

"WHY, nothing can stop you now," the medico seemed almost startled. "You're only a little way from Tuttle's—"

"Something," Luke cut him short, and his craggy face had turned hard as his eyes, "stopped dad. He was a well man this morning. Now he's dead."

"Are you insinuating," Dr. Grubber's white burnsides started to bristle, "that I don't know a heart attack when I see one?"

"Maybe dad's heart gave out," Luke said, and he was trying to bring his own disordered thoughts into clear focus, "but something contributed to it. Can shock knock a man out?"

"Yes," Dr. Grubber said slowly. "Shock is something our profession really knows little about yet, but its effect can be devastating, if the provocation is great enough."

Luke nodded, and spoke half to himself. "I had one question needing an answer when I came here. I aimed to find out why dad should come to Babylon, and *The Colorado House*. Now, along with that I've got to have a talk with Treet Andrews. I've got to learn what dad was trying to tell me I'd have to find."

"Then do your hunting in Fabersville, son," the doctor counseled. "Babylon's never taken kindly to your community. Cattlemen and sodbusters don't mix any better than clabber and sweet milk, and I'll tell you somethin' else you may not know. While you were havin' your troubles making a cut through the Thunder Hills to Pilgrim River, Molly McCray's dad and the rest of 'em just about split their sides laughing at you. Faber's Folly, they called it then, and they made up daily pools bettin' on how many of your people would pull out every day when the Western & Topeka's Denver Special stopped here. Plenty of 'em have gotten discouraged since that first Winter and done just that, but plenty more have stuck to their ground waiting for the water your dad promised 'em."

"But now," the doctor's voice became even more thoughtful, "you'll find a different feeling in Babylon, son. You might almost think Cunnel McCray, and his Cattle Pool are getting a mite afraid you'll succeed in bringing water to the Seton Plains. And when men are afraid of something, they'll fight. Water means more sodbusters, and the end of their empires. So look out for trouble, son."

Luke's eyes had narrowed as the doctor explained the feeling the near completion of their project had aroused here in the plains cowtown. Nearer even than Dr. Grubber might realize, for there was a deep barranca shearing across Jeb Tuttle's acres that Luke figured would need only a little clearing and straightening to make it reach the laterals that would carry water across the plains. It was his ace in the hole to put water into the smaller irrigation canals before Pool cattlemen might realize that it was near enough to endanger their security. Only his father, Paddy O'Rourke, and Treet Andrews knew his plan. Even Tuttle had been kept in ignorance. No inkling of his

The quick hand of Death brushed a curtain of gray against the man's face.

plan could reach Pool ears—and yet something had brought Will Faber to Babylon.

Luke looked slantwise at Dr. Grubber, and his voice was like the soft purr of some big cat. "I'm going downstairs and have a talk with the clerk. Likely he was on duty when dad came in this morning. He'll know what room dad visited, and I'll find out who was in it or eat some lead trying. Adios, doc. We'll make people quit calling our canal Faber's Folly, or bust a lot of caps!"

DOWNSTAIRS in the dingy lobby, Luke swung with long strides toward the clerk's counter. The youth behind it was a tall, pimply young fellow, with a mean, bored look about him.

Brushing the register aside, Luke leaned his elbows on the counter. "Son," he murmured, "were you on duty when Will Faber came in this morning?"

"Mebbe I was, and mebbe I warn't," the youth said insolently.

Luke held his temper, and brought a five dollar bill from his pocket. He wrapped it suggestively about one finger. "Would this help your memory?"

The clerk glanced at the bill, and his lips curled. "You sodbusters," he said deliberately, "were always a bunch of pikers, but five is better than nothin'. What do you want to know?"

"Who did Will Faber come here to visit?"

The clerk grinned, showing stained teeth. "Hold your hat, Faber. The answer to that will curl your hair—"

Lancing lead cut short his last words. Luke saw orange muzzle flame light the dark square of the doorway that led into the barroom beyond the lobby, and then gunsound filled *The Colorado House* with its sudden roar.

For an instant, the clerk facing him stood moveless, and then for the second time within the space of minutes Luke saw the quick hand of Death brush a curtain of gray across a man's face.

As the shock of the youth's fall shook the floor, Luke moved toward the doorway, and he was wondering if that bullet had been for him instead of the boy. But as quickly he discarded that idea. The lead had found its intended mark, and something told Luke the clerk had died because he had been going to answer a question that might spell damnation or salvation for Fabersville.

However, there was another who could answer the same question. The man who had fired the death bullet. And halting in the bar door, Luke could see his quarry.

It was lanky Prodd Cantler, Colonel McCray's foreman. The man was standing at the bar, staring slack-mouthed at the curling wisp of smoke rising from the long Colt in his hand, and saying:

"Why, the danged thing went off! Sure hope I didn't hit anything—"

The MC foreman was either a finished actor or an accomplished liar was the thought that crossed Luke's mind.

And then Cantler seemed to notice the engineer for the first time. "Faber," he blinked. "My lead didn't come near you, I hope."

"No," Luke said, "the clerk stopped your bullet first. He's dead, Cantler!"

"Dead?" the MC foreman ejaculated. "Kittler's dead?"

"Shot through the back," Luke told him, and his lips were thin. "If you'd *aimed* your slug, you couldn't have drilled him any cleaner."

"Why, Prodd was just showing us a new trick," one of the other ranchers at the bar spoke up.

There was sincerity in his voice that Luke couldn't mistake. If this had been murder, Cantler had planned it cleverly. A half dozen witnesses would be willing to swear honestly that the MC man had just been showing them a "new trick".

"So that's that!" Luke said flatly.

"Lord," Cantler had lifted a full glass of whisky from the bar, "we'll have to take care of poor Kittler. I'll sure stand his funeral bill!" He took the whisky, and his grimace was more like a sardonic grin as he looked straight at the big engineer standing in the doorway. "Mebbe *you'd* like to have a drink, Faber. Sodbusters ain't used to seein' men killed, I guess."

Luke's smile matched the foreman's. "I've seen more men die than you'll ever know, Cantler," he said softly. "They use fellers like me down Mexico way, too, you know. I was there when dad called me back to help him dig our Big Ditch. So don't talk to me about killing. Engineers don't spend all their time with tripods and sextants—or swilling whisky!"

Cantler moved forward a pace from the bar, and his hands were hanging straight at his sides. "I don't like the last of that, Faber," he growled. "You sanctimonious sodbusters who don't take a drink are enough to make a man gag. Am I right, boys?"

Tension was building in the barroom. Luke could sense it like an electric current coursing through the air, and he was remembering words of caution Dr. Grubber had voiced. Babylon was an enemy town, and these cattlemen here would back any play Cantler made.

Luke backstepped a pace. "Prodd," he said quietly, and his Colt had come from leather, "you're going to walk out to my horse with me. Let's call you my life insurance."

The lank foreman had started to sweat. "Listen, Faber," he blustered, "the Pool will get you for this. Ain't airy man marchin' me in front of a gun without paying for it!"

From his place at the bar, a Pool cattleman cried: "Are you declaring war on us, Faber?"

"No," Luke said, and his eyes touched the rancher briefly, "I'm just aiming to ride out of this town with a whole hide. I've still got some Ditch to build, and I need my health."

"YOU'LL NEED MORE THAN that, Faber!" Cantler said, and there was a secret confidence in his voice a man could not mistake. "You—"

Two figures bulked suddenly in the lobby doorway, and Luke's eyes swept across his shoulder at the sound of their boots. One of the newcomers was Molly McCray, and the other was her father, old Colonel Bill. He was craggy looking as any of the mountains rimming three sides of these plains, and as hard. Bill McCray wasn't going to see a single acre he called his own turned into a farm without putting up a fight. But it would be a fair fight, Luke knew. There'd be no lead from his guns aimed at a man's back.

The Colonel's voice was a bellow, deep as a bull's. "What the tarnal is goin' on here?" he demanded. "Me'n Molly heard the sound of a shot strollin' past, and now we see yuh, Faber, with a Colt in yore hand and it looks like you've been p'intin' it at my foreman. Start talkin', mister!"

Luke smiled thinly, and his own rough face was hard as the Colonel's. "You'll find a dead man behind the desk, if you've a mind to look," he said quietly. "And these friends of yours," he included the cattlemen in the room, "will tell you that Cantler killed him. He claims it was an accident. Maybe it was, and mebbe it wasn't."

Cantler had dropped into a crouch, and his dark face was growing darker. "Mebbe you better explain that remark, too, Faber!" he growled.

CHAPTER III

Fabersville Double-cross

THE MEDICO had counseled caution, but Luke tossed it suddenly to the four winds. Sometimes even a doctor could be wrong.

"I'll answer that, Cantler," he said, and his voice was like iron. "My father is lying dead upstairs. Kittler is dead behind his counter. Dad's heart went bad. Leastways, that's what Doc Grubber claims. Now Will came here to pay some Babylon gent a visit. Kittler was going to give me his name but your lead cut him short, *conveniently.*"

Cantler moved with the speed of a cougar dropping from a limb. "You can't accuse me of murder!" he shouted, and his right fist lashed out.

Luke swung with the blow, and his left caught the MC foreman in the middle. Cantler doubled forward, like a closing hinge. Luke straightened him with a right that sent pain reaching clear to his shoulder, and sidestepped as the MC man toppled toward him.

A Colt clanged from the bar, and Luke saw a long sliver lift from the floor at his feet.

"Ike," Bill McCray yelled, "put that damned gun away. Prodd got just what he was askin' for. Pussonally, I don't like this danged sodbuster any better than you boys, but by damn he'll be treated like a gentleman while I'm around! Now, Faber—"

"I'm riding," Luke cut him short.

"And I'm keeping you company out of town," Molly McCray's eyes were scornful as she swept the Pool men behind Cantler's crumpled body. "We'll have no Fabersville blood staining our streets!"

Aboard Whipper, with the girl's gray mare pacing beside the gelding, Luke kept his face carefully straight ahead as they rode along the cow-town's single main street. He was conscious of the scrutiny of many eyes from behind shop windows and shady porches, and he spoke without turning his head.

"Molly, go on back to your dad," he directed softly. "I don't need a shepherd to show me the way home."

"You'll need more than that if you come around here again," the girl answered. "Luke, with your father dead, you're the only one who can keep The Ditch moving. You're so close now, you've got to think of the ones who've invested their money and borne hardship because they had faith in your dad. Stay out of trouble, Luke for—for me, if not them!"

Luke felt his heart start to sing a strange wild tune. This was the first proof he'd ever had that Molly McCray might care for him, and then he throttled the warm response that had come to his lips. He had no right to speak the things in his heart until water was flowing into all the laterals, and peace between farmer

and stockman was a thing that would last forever. And that couldn't come until the mystery surrounding his father's fatal visit to Babylon was explained.

"I'll do what I can, Molly," he told her a little stiffly.

"You—you intimated that Prodd shot that boy, Kittler, deliberately," the girl said.

Luke shrugged. "Kittler told me that he could tell me things that would curl my hair. Those were his last words. Cantler's lead came mighty conveniently. That's all I've got to say now."

He risked one glance at her as his heels hit Whipper's flanks, and he found no beauty in her face. Only anguish and fear, and worry.

A PAIR OF MILES across the greasewood plains Fabersville loomed through the early dusk, a skeleton handful now of houses and business places that once had been freshly painted. But bitter winds and scouring sands had scored the paint from boards long since warped beyond repair. And out across the plains were other sodbust shanties. He could see them like mile hills dotting the dun expanse of arid plain. Some of those houses

Under his blow Cantler staggered back, dropping his gun.

were occupied by men and women as fanatical as his father had been in his belief that water would bring them riches. Other farmhouses were empty. Colonists, embittered by this bleak desert, and the time it had taken to make a cut through the Thunder Hills to the ceaseless flow of Pilgrim River, had packed their belongings and climbed the Denver Special. They were the ones who had spread the word of 'Faber's Folly' throughout Colorado and the nation.

The newspapers had printed stories as damning as they'd once been glowing, but instead of despairing Will Faber had only fought the harder. His every thought, and his every dollar had gone into the heartbreaking task of cutting a canal through unfriendly, rocky hills. No man could have been more sincere, Luke thought as he rode toward Fabersville. And no man in all the colony had suffered more than his parent. He had literally given his life for them—for only colony business could have taken him to Babylon.

"So I'm right back on the old treadmill," Luke muttered savagely, and his eyes were finding the square bulk of Fabersville's only two-story dwelling a half mile ahead. It belonged to Treet Andrews, the town's one banker, and Secretary-Treasurer of the Faber Colony Company. He had come to them from the Western-Topeka railroad.

"A powerful man to have on our side, son," Will Faber had said more than once. And indeed he had been, Luke admitted to himself. His financial backing had kept

the colony alive these lean years. Without Treet Andrews, Fabersville would have turned into a ghost town long before this, Luke was willing to admit. So why had his father mentioned Andrews name on his death bed?

"Mebbe Treet can answer that one himself," Luke muttered, and he rode through the open gate in the picket fence surrounding the cupolaed mansion.

A hound, that had never done more than lift a lazy eye before, came loping around a corner of the big house baying excitedly. And then the front door swung inward, it seemed a little hastily.

Treet Andrews filled the opening. He was a brawny, heavy man, and yet his step was light as a dancer's. Attired meticulously as always, he raised a hand to the engineer.

Luke blinked. Usually Treet Andrews waited inside for guests to come to him.

"My boy," the banker's voice was sonorous as a politician's, "what brings you here at this hour of the afternoon?"

There was a horseman whipping out the road from Fabersville toward Andrews' mansion, set a quarter mile or more on this side of town. The sound of hooves against the hard road was like the angry beat of a drum.

Luke's head swung, and the rider hunched low over the withers of the approaching horse looked like Paddy O'Rourke, but it couldn't be his foreman, for Paddy would be at The Ditch directing operations.

He swung his eyes back to the banker, and he was a little surprised that Andrews hadn't asked him to come in. "My father brings me," Luke said grimly. "He is dead, Treet, but before he died he mentioned your name. I want to know why."

"Dead?" Treet Andrews ejaculated. "Glory be. When? How? Tell me all about it, my boy. This is very sudden."

"Too sudden," Luke said quietly. "He mentioned your name as I said. Did you see him this morning before he started for Babylon?"

For the split tenth of a second, the banker seemed to hesitate, then he shook his head. "Why, no," he said emphatically. "I haven't left the house all day, and no one has called save you. You say your father rode to Babylon? That seems very odd."

"You put it mildly," Luke said flatly. "The only thing that would take him there was wind of something that might hurt our colony. Whatever it was he got an answer that was tough enough to hit his heart. We've got to learn what he learned, Andrews, or we'll be in for trouble—"

The clamor of approaching hooves was louder now. Luke twisted in his saddle as the rider swept in through the gate, and surprise made him blink. His first guess had been right. The horseman was Paddy O'Rourke.

IN THE FADING twilight, the Irishman's seamed face looked grim, and Luke could almost see his friend's old body vibrating with some excitement that was hard for him to suppress. And yet, when he spoke, his words were strangely mild.

"Howdy, gents," he greeted them. "Happened to be in town and I recognized yuh riding this way, Luke, so I headed out to get the news first hand. How's your dad, son? No, don't be tellin' me now. You can do that as we ride back to town."

Paddy O'Rourke wanted him alone, Luke realized. It was as apparent as though he'd expressed the words aloud.

"Will is dead," Treet Andrews said sonorously. "His loss will mean a lot to our little community, but the rest of us will have to carry on for the sake of his memory. Luke, my boy, be sure and drop into the bank tomorrow. We will have to discuss your affairs."

"There won't be much to discuss," Luke answered shortly. "Every penny of ours is tied up in The Ditch. If it fails, we follow."

"My old woman's got supper waitin' on the stove," O'Rourke said suggestively.

Luke nodded, and he started to swing Whipper, wondering what word Paddy had brought that couldn't be spoken before the banker.

O'Rourke put his mount into a run as they reached the road.

Luke looked at him. "What's your rush?" he yelled. "Supper will keep."

"It will fry to a cinder before we ever eat it," O'Rourke's blue eyes were blazing. "Begorra, and all hell's loose on a hot griddle, but I did not want to say so before Andrews, because his cashier, Al Hipper, is helpin' stir the pot to a boil. The news, son, is bad enough to kill your father, even if he was still alive. Here, take a look at this." His suddenly trembling hand had brought a square of paper from inside his shirt.

Talking, they'd both involuntarily slowed their mounts. Luke reached out and took the paper from his foreman's hand. Bold print glared back at him as he unfolded it.

NO TRESPASSING
Violators will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.
Signed:
Jeremiah Tuttle

Luke read the notice, and his lips parted almost stupidly. He found it hard to believe his eyes. The barranca across Jeb Tuttle's place had been his ace to reach their lateral canals in a hurry. It would cost untold thousands to detour his premises, ruin investors already assessed to their last spare dollar.

"We're sold out," O'Rourke's words seemed to come from a far distance. "Jeb's sold us out to Colonel Bill McCray's Babylon crowd, and Sheriff Longmire is setting on Tuttle's line right now with a tough crew of Pool gunnies!"

CHAPTER IV

Lead Greets a Liar

"JEB wouldn't sell out the colony!" Luke rapped. "Hell, he's been one of our biggest boosters. What's he got to say for himself?"

"Say?" the Irishman shouted. "Not one damn' thing, because he can't. Son, he's disappeared, slick as a whistle. But what else could yuh expect?"

Luke looked at his companion and his green-gray eyes were cool as ice. "I'd expect dirty work, Paddy," he said succinctly. "Mebbe my dad was trying to prevent this. It's answer enough for his call to Babylon, and the way to prove it is to find Tuttle. Dad tried to tell me to find something. He could have meant Jeb, and I'm just wondering if mebbe Treet Andrews might help us. Dad mentioned his name."

"Then let's swing back there," O'Rourke snapped. "I'll ram a gun-barrel between his teeth, and he'll talk, begorra, with the feel of steel in his throat. Why, damme, Treet could have been playin' us for sapleens all along. He's let us break our hearts getting The Ditch ready to pour water into our laterals, and 'sides you and me and your dad he's the only one who knew our plan of speeding things by using that barracana across Jeb's place. If he could git control of The Ditch now, a crew of his own hiring could open a way to that gulch in forty-eight hours, and then all the land we've held this long time would be his, and he'd reap the rich harvest. Right now it looks like he's playin' both ends ag'in the middle usin' Cattle Pool men who hate us to hold what ain't rightfully his'n. But he'll double-cross them as he's done us when the time is ripe."

Luke drew a deep breath, and he was remembering the wicked grin that had crossed Prodd Cantler's face when the MC foreman had told him he'd need more than his health to complete The Ditch.

"Mebbe him and Prodd," he said softly. "Pool men wouldn't follow Andrews, but they'd trail with one of their own breed. They're afraid of losing their range to more sodbusters if we bring the water."

"And your dad got the scent of what was brewing, and tried to scotch it," O'Rourke growled. "So let's git back to Treet's place—"

"Wait," Luke cut him short. He'd been looking ahead down the length of Fabersville's wide main street. "Something's making up ahead."

It was like a deluge of fireflies in the early darkness. A swarm of torches that converged on the town's central square from seemingly every direction, and Luke heard O'Rourke curse.

"Good heavens," he ejaculated, "I can see I made me one mistake. Whin that cussed sheriff come to The Ditch, and stuck his notice under my nose, I was so mad I told the crew to knock off for the rest of the afternoon. And ivery one of 'em has been in town at his home a-spreadin' the word of what's happened. Al Hipper's done his share here in town, and now they're all gittin' together in the square. Son, with all the trouble we've had, I'll lay ye that many of 'em will figure this is the last straw. And with Hipper's smooth tongue nudgin' 'em, a many will be ready to hop the Denver Special come mornin—"

"Which is just what Treet wants," Luke said, and his craggy face was like iron.

"You'll have to give 'em more than just talk," Paddy O'Rourke said somberly. "Words are like a clean bone yuh toss to a starvin' dog. These folks have been livin' on promises for two years, boy. They'll need red meat to hold 'em this time—"

AS THEY DREW closer, Luke could see that practically every citizen as Paddy had guessed, was milling about the square. Somebody had pulled a big packing box into the center of it, and as they approached the outskirts of the throng, he could make out a tall, dapper figure standing atop the box. It was Al Hipper.

"I'll kill that snaky son," O'Rourke growled.

"Listen to him," Luke told the Irishman quietly. "Nobody's spotted us yet."

"—And I will tell you, friends," Hipper was declaiming loudly with outspread hands, "that this is more than we can bear. When one of our own kind deserts us for the camp of the enemy, I, for one, find my faith shattered. We have suffered through two long years, living on the promises of Will Faber who founded this community. And now we have this. Why weren't precautions taken long before this to insure our right-of-way to the laterals that we have all built with our own hands? That is a question I would like to ask him."

"Ask me!" Luke's voice rolled out to meet the cashier's and he pressed Whipper forward to the rim of the crowd. Torchlight rose to redden his hard face, and startled glances turned in his direction, but he had eyes for only the man on the packing case.

"All right," Al Hipper's hachet-visage wore a satisfied smirk, "I'll ask *you*, Luke Faber!"

"And here's your answer," Luke snapped, and he forced back the hot anger that was mounting in him. This was the time, if ever, to stay cool-headed. "My father led every last one of you here. You came because you wanted new homes in the West. This was a community project and rights-of-way across all properties owned by any of us was granted. Jeb Tuttle's agreement still holds until he tells me with his own mouth that he's sold out to the Babylon Pool. And tonight I'm going to prove it. You folks don't know how close the water is to our laterals. There's a barranca across Tuttle's property I planned to widen and straighten, but it'll serve in a pinch as it stands. You'll see water in our laterals come morning, if a hundred strong backs, and some good mule-teams are willing to work out the night—"

"You can't trespass on posted land!" Al Hipper's voice rose shrilly.

Luke answered him ironically. "We won't set a foot across Tuttle's line. Pilgrim River water will save us the trouble. Let him put some of that in his Babylon jail!"

"Folks," Paddy O'Rourke couldn't keep his tongue out of it, "Luke ain't told you yet that his dad is dead. Will Faber died tryin' to prevent just what has happened. You can say, bejabbers, that he died of a broken heart. Mebbe he's watchin' us from Heaven right now. So, air you goin' to let him down?"

"I've tailed a Fresno for twelve hours today," a burly workman yelled, "and I'm willin' to manhandle it another twelve. Let's finish The Ditch for Will Faber!"

The man's words were like sparks to powder. Luke heard a throaty cheer rise from the throats of men renewed with

"Luke, get your horse. Your father is dying." She didn't look at him as she spoke.

hope. "Send a good man to open the floodgates," he ordered Paddy. "It'll take time for the water to work this far. If we move fast, everything will be done at once."

"It'll be done afore that," O'Rourke's chuckle sounded a little odd, "pervidin' we find Tuttle. If we don't, the sheriff can arrest every one of us in spite of your fine words."

"That he can," Luke nodded, "but I'm gambling that I'll find Tuttle."

"You?" Paddy O'Rourke howled. "You mean 'we'! 'Tis no job for one man to tackle."

"Maybe not," Luke told him flatly, "but I'm tackling it just the same. They'll need your hand at The Ditch."

Luke glanced back at the crowd, and it was a laughing, excited throng now. They were all ready to gamble, and then his eyes found the packing case. It was empty. The cashier had disappeared.

"Hipper will be riding to tell his betters the turn things have taken," he murmured to the Irishman, "and I'll be waiting on the edge of town to follow him. Take care of The Ditch, Paddy."

"Always, I'm gittin' the short end of things," the Irishman growled. "But I'll do 'er. Just you be mindin' your powder, boy. Keep 'er dry! And now, ye sapleens," his voice rose in a roar for all the crowd to hear, "get after your picks and shovels. Sometimes they're a danged sight mightier than the sword!"

LUKE WAITED IN the darkness at the edge of town, and by bright starlight he read his watch occasionally. Time slipped by slowly, and the face of the Seton Plains remained empty. He waited impatiently for the space of an hour, and then he knew he had made a wrong guess. Al Hipper was not leaving Fabersville tonight, or else he'd slipped past him.

It had been an hour wasted, and time was more precious than gold right now. Luke cursed, and his heels found Whipper's flanks. He swung the bay into the palely shining road that led past An-

drews' mansion and on to Babylon.

Light glowed behind the windows of the banker's downstairs study, and once again his hound came to bark excitedly. The dog's action was something Luke couldn't understand.

He swung down and mounted the steps. He knuckled the door twice, and when no response came he tried the latch. It opened easily beneath his fingers. The hall was empty, but light shone beneath the crack of the closed study door on the left. Andrews, he thought grimly, might have fallen asleep inside the room. The banker would not be one to run. He'd be staying here, ready to offer succor to heartsick colony families. He'd be magnanimous, and offer them ten cents on the dollar for land they'd bought and homesteaded, then later resell it for a hundred times that to a fresh crop of emigrants who'd be eager to buy irrigated land.

Hand close to his holstered Colt, Luke pushed the study door inward, and stepped through. And even before Al Hipper's nasal voice spoke from behind him, he knew that he'd stepped into a trap for the study was apparently empty save for the lighted lamp on Andrews' flat-top desk in the center of the room.

"Hold it, Faber," Hipper drawled. "You're going to make a nice looking corpse!"

Luke flung himself forward as he heard the dry click of a revolver coming to full cock behind his back. The splayed fingers of his left hand struck the desk lamp, and his right reached for his Colt as Hipper's gun roared behind him. He felt lead scorch his back as the lamp tipped and shattered, spilling kerosene across the desk.

Wick flame licked with sudden hunger at the oil as Luke hit the floor and rolled to put the desk between himself and the cashier.

He'd hoped to bring darkness, and instead there was garish brightness in the room as burning oil threw a sheet of flame toward the ceiling. A bullet struck solidly into the corner of the desk, and Luke saw Hipper crouched behind the door he had opened. The man's lips were slitted back from white teeth, and Luke used them for his target as his Colt cleared. He squeezed trigger, and watched the force of his lead drive Hipper backward against the wall. He'd missed the man's mouth, but his bullet had evidently found the other's chest for he saw Hipper's free hand claw up toward his open coat.

Heat came with scorching force, and an oily cloud of smoke swept down to hide the cashier as Luke lifted himself to his feet.

He heard the crash of Hipper's body as the man sprawled forward, and his thin scream:

"Faber, don't let me burn—"

Treet Andrews' house was going up in smoke. In seconds, Luke realized, the study would be a raging inferno of flame but first he had to make the cashier add a couple of cards to the hand of mystery he'd drawn when Molly McCray had brought him the word that his father was dying in Babylon.

Blood was spreading over Hipper's white shirt when Luke reached his side, but the cashier was still alive. "Treet," Luke said, and there was no mercy in his eyes, "is behind this whole deal. He's played both ends against the middle from the beginning, but we weren't smart enough to see it. He loaned us money to bring water almost to the Seton Plains, figuring to stop us by grabbing Tuttle's land at the right time. Am I correct?"

The cashier nodded. "Get me out of here," he croaked.

"Not yet," Luke said inexorably. "Tell me where they're holding Tuttle, or stay here and burn!"

Hipper snarled with a dying man's sudden courage, "In a place you'll never find, Faber. And he'll stay there until you and all the fools who trailed your foreman out to The Ditch are shot to doll-rags. Them's the sheriff's orders if a sod-bust man gets near Tuttle's line. So you better go and call 'em off, Faber, if you don't want their blood on your head!"

CHAPTER V

Boundary Benediction

ROARING FLAMES added their own obbligato to the dying man's words. The fire was licking at drapes and wallpaper now, and a draft from the open door had swept it out one window, Luke saw. In minutes, Treet Andrews' mansion would become a huge torch, lighting the countryside. Smoke made Luke cough, and he reached down to pick up the cashier, then slowly straightened.

Al Hipper would never feel the touch of fire. He was dead. He had died with those last words on his lips. "They'll be shot to doll-rags if you don't call 'em off, Faber—"

Luke stepped toward the door with fingers of fire scorching his back, and he was hardly conscious of the danger behind him, for his thoughts were on those colony men who had followed Paddy O'Rourke out to The Ditch. Men who had already suffered enough. Men who might die unless Jeb Tuttle could be found.

Once again, the baying of Treet Andrews' big hound cut through Luke's thoughts, and it made him remember many things as his hand touched the door panel. Small events that meant nothing when they had occurred, but now took on sudden meaning. There'd been the hound's unusual excitement when he'd stopped here on his way home from Babylon. And there'd been the unusual appearance of Treet Andrews, himself, coming to the door of his mansion. It was something that had never happened before, Treet's habit being to wait here in his study for callers to announce themselves. The banker, Luke recalled, had also failed to invite him in.

"It could mean he had someone here that he didn't want a Faber seeing," Luke breathed. "Maybe Tuttle, for here's one place you'd never count on searching!"

He was flinging the door wide as he spoke, and draft whipping into the room roused the flames like bellows stirring a forge fire. It turned the study into a cauldron. Behind him, Luke heard the crash of timbers as the ceiling caved. Smoke was already billowing through the hall and up the stairs to the second floor, like fog pouring in from the sea. Luke felt it stinging his eyes, clogging his lungs. Common sense was urging him toward the front door and open night beyond, and then he pictured those Fabersville folks following Paddy O'Rourke. Pictured them, and Pool gunmen hovering on Tuttle's line with orders to shoot.

"Jeb's got to be here," Luke coughed. "If he's not, there'll be no time to look anywhere else."

Flame was crawling out to the hall runner when his boots hit the bottom riser of the stairs. He was half way up the flight, fighting his way through smoke when the first lead came winging down at him. It sounded like the whine of a hornet close to his ear, and then gun-sound mingled with the hungry roar of the spreading fire.

Luke jerked his eyes upward. Billowing smoke distorted his vision, but through it he caught a glimpse of three figures at the head of the stairs. The one in the center was tall, lathy, and his head was swathed in bandages. Luke recognized Jeb Tuttle. The farmer was sagging on limber legs between Treet Andrews and Prodd Cantler.

The portly banker's voice came down to him shrilly. "Faber, get out. Get out, before we're all burned to death.

"He's the one who'll burn," Cantler said contemptuously, and then Luke saw the MC foreman's hand give Tuttle a quick shove. The farmer came stumbling toward him with the force of a battering ram, and the stairs were too narrow to dodge his falling body.

Lead from Cantler's Colt whipped down at him. Luke saw the pale wink of muzzle flame through smoke, but the bullet traveled above his head. He tipped his own gun up, praying his shot might miss Tuttle's pinwheeling body. At the report, Cantler seemed to trip. His lank body bent forward as Treet Andrews grabbed frantically at hide-out derringers holstered beneath his arms.

Tuttle's stumbling weight hit him, and Luke felt himself going over backward. Heat gnawed at his shirt as he struck the hall floor. Tuttle was half across his

legs, pinning him down, and Andrews' shrill cry was like a dirge in his ears.

"I'll kill you both—"

DESPERATELY LUKE dragged his Colt from beneath the farmer, and swung it toward the banker as he came lunging down the stairs. One bullet was all it would take—all he had left. He touched trigger, and Andrews straightened like a man running against a wall. He hovered there, alongside the sprawled shape of Prodd Cantler and angry words poured from his lips.

"You're a fool, Faber. I'd have cut you and your father in on the pay-off if he'd been man enough to see reason. That's what I told him this morning when we met Prodd in Babylon at *The Colorado House*. He said 'no', and it hit him hard. Too hard, I guess. He was dying when he got out of our room. And now, you—you're playing the same fool for the sake of sod-bust hooligans. You—" gushing blood stoppered his throat.

Luke saw him pitch forward against Prodd Cantler, and he knew that neither of them would feel the flames.

Jeb Tuttle was trying to stand. Luke helped him erect, and spun toward the door at the opposite end of the hall. Angry red tonguelets of flame were inching across the runner. Luke put his lips close to the farmer's ear. "Can you make it outside?" he yelled.

Tuttle nodded, and his beard-stubbled face looked almost serene. "We've got to," he answered. "I'm the only man who can stop a slaughter. The sheriff won't go ag'in my word—if we get there in time!"

Time! It was like a broad hand pushing at them as Luke boosted Tuttle into Whipper's saddle, and climbed up behind him. Garish light from the burning mansion was already lighting the Seton Plains, showing the stark, crooked limbs of greasewood and chaparral.

"Some day," Tuttle mumbled, "we'll see corn instead of bresh!"

Luke nodded as he put Whipper into a quick run. "That was dad's dream," he said simply.

The plain slipped away behind them. They skirted Fabersville, starkly silhouetted by the hungry light of the fire behind them.

"Thet cussed banker tolled me over to his house by sayin' he had a private proposition to make me," Tuttle told Luke as they rode, "and when I heered it, I reared right back and said no. That's when the party started. They whupped me, and tied me up, and Andrews forged my name when I wouldn't write it. But they were a mite afeared to kill me afore they could nail you, too. They knew you'd monkey-wrench their plan."

"I haven't yet," Luke told him grimly.

He strained his eyes ahead as they lifted from a desert swale, and involuntary excitement stirred his blood. No more than a mile ahead of them now lay a string of small, brushwood fires marking Tuttle's line. And beyond, at right angles, Luke could make out work fires marking the course of The Ditch.

"Them two strings of bonfires look jest like a Cross," Tuttle ejaculated. "Glory be, son, I never expected to see the like on these plains. Why, that sign could be a good omen. It could mean peace for all of us. It—"

The farmer's words stopped, and Luke felt himself stiffen as though a ramrod had been shoved down his back, for something that neither of them could understand was happening out there on the plain. First, one of the fires lighting the course of The Ditch, and then another was winking out as though a huge candle-snuffer had been dropped over it.

"Glory—" Tuttle's voice was awed. "What can be goin' on, son?"

"We'll soon see," Luke gritted, and his heels urged a last burst of speed from Whipper. Then, even above the beat of the bay's hooves, he heard the faint, far-off popping of guns. And as though their sound was a signal, one sweep of some unseen giant hand wiped all but one bonfire from the face of the plain!

THEY WERE CLOSE enough now to see silhouetted figures milling about it. Luke loosened his Colt as they neared the single fire still blazing, for there was no guessing the reception that might greet them. All would depend on the

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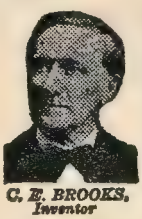

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temper of Sheriff Longmire's Pool posse.

And then he spotted Colonel Bill McCray in the light of the flames. The cattleman seemed to be going mad. He was stamping about, hands waving in air.

"Old coot's daft—" Tuttle began.

Luke cut him short with a clear hail. "Hold your men, McCray. I'm bringing in Jeb Tuttle."

His call froze the cattleman as they swept to the rim of the fire-lit circle. Grizzled Sheriff Longmire came in from the shadows, and beside him walked Molly McCray. Luke caught her eye, and the girl gave him a laughing smile.

"Listen, Luke," she said. "Listen, dad, and the rest of you."

"That's what I've been doing!" Colonel Bill McCray snapped, "and I don't like the sound one damn' bit!"

Luke swung his head, and he heard what might have been a soft breeze blowing across the plain, chuckling through the underbrush. But there was no wind. It had to be something else.

"Water!" he spoke through lips dry as the sands soaking up the precious liquid. "Water. In The Ditch. But it can't have reached here yet," he added like a man dreaming. "They didn't open the gates until two hours ago—"

"Well it sure an' Hades warn't whisky that doused our other fires," Colonel McCray fumed. "It's water, all right, and the stuff has crossed Whipple's boundary, and is washin' away good ground. So git the hell out of here and go put a stop to it or we'll see you in the calaboose!"

"Not while I'm here," Jeb Tuttle drawled, "to sorta back him up. 'Pears to me like you an' the sheriff are the trespassers. Not Fabersville water!"

And much as though his words had brought it, Luke's eyes widened on a brown stream flowing into their view.

"Faber's Folly," he whispered the words, and for a moment he forgot all those people watching him.

"Two years," Molly McCray said softly. She had come to stand at Whipper's side, and Luke felt her hand reach up to meet his. "But the suffering is done now. Your people will prosper."

"And so will yours," Luke said a little absently, for he still couldn't understand how water had traversed the length of The Ditch so rapidly.

And then the answer came into view in the shape of a muddy little man dripping from gray hair to the cracked heels of his boots. Paddy O'Rourke strode into the circle and he was grinning like a boy.

"Begorra, Luke," he began, "and 'tis a fine night for the Irish!"

"But how," Luke Faber began, for his engineering logic told him that The Ditch couldn't have filled this quickly, "did you—"

Paddy O'Rourke cut him short with another boyish grin. "Well, son," he grinned, "I outguessed ye a mite. Whin Longmire here brung his ultimatum I started two men back to open the gates right then, figurin' you'd tell me to do the same when we met. Only trouble is the danged stuff got here a bit quicker than I expected. That's why it's a-runnin' every whichaway now. Folks are settin' back along The Ditch a-lappin' it up, and bathin' something scandalous. 'Tis a good thing, begorra, that it snuffed out your fires. So Cunnel let me offer you and all these fine hooligans with ye the chance to git your own free bath. That goes for you, too, sheriff!"

"And me?" Molly McCray asked demurely.

"No!" Luke said, and he was suddenly smiling. "Not you. That'll come later, and privately. Right now we've got a date with a parson, Molly McCray, if you'll agree."

"It's awfully sudden," Molly answered with mock seriousness, "but I think we can arrange it if dad will ride with us."

"And that I will not do," Colonel McCray growled. "Two's company, three's a crowd. Dang it, I knew something like this would come along to upset me in my declining years. Why, if you ain't all careful, I'll be raising alfalfy myself—and if I do," his ferocious glance went about the circle of Pool cattlemen, "you hombres will follow suit, so help me!"

"Faber's Folly," Luke murmured.

"And that's somethin' folks will have to quit callin' it," Paddy O'Rourke added. "I'm hopin' your dad is looking down on this fine scene!"

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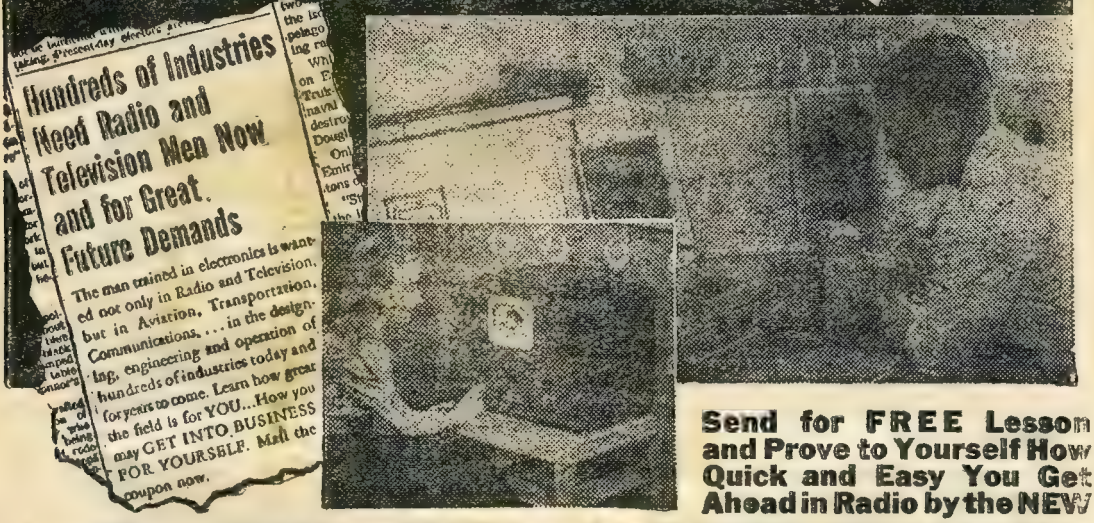

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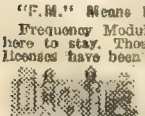

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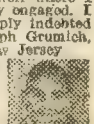

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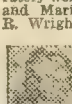

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(Continued from page 11)

new leg," Jim commented, when Yancy was done. "Bonny said you'd been good to her, so I'll tell you the whole story. I fought Joad last night, all right. And I whipped him. Then I left. I didn't kill him. Bonny met me, and we talked. She left real soon because she was scared of Joad. And a good thing. She'd no sooner gone than he popped out of the bushes and jumped me. He's bigger'n me and mighty handy, in spite of his pegleg. For a while I thought I was a goner. Then I managed to land a lucky one on his glass jaw. I cleared out quick. But I did lose my hatband, but I didn't think enough of it to go back after it and risk more trouble with Joad."

Yancy nodded. "Rice is in with Morton, since he helped plant the money in my soogans. They've probably been waiting for a chance to kill Joad, but Morton probably wanted to marry Bonny, first. Then I come along and give them a chance to kill him and force Bonny to marry him. They must've trailed Joad and, after you left him unconscious, finished him with a rock. Then they went out this morning to lug him in, and were lucky enough to find your hatband. That made it perfect."

"Made it look perfect to them!" Jim growled. "But they ain't getting away with it."

"Got any firearms?" Yancy asked.

"Yeah. A carbine and a couple of sixes. Can you use a gun?"

Yancy grinned, but his face had grayed suddenly. "Yeah. I used to be a killer, son—a town tamer. But before you were born, I traded my sixes for a square. Looks like I gotta swap back again!"

A HALF HOUR later Yancy and Hendricks were plunging toward the Bar W. "How many men you think'll side Morton in this?" Jim asked.

"I'm certain of Rice, and probably that man Whitey. Maybe there's others. Likely Morton'd want to make sure of three or four of them and take them in on it. He could pay off handsome once he got his hands on the Bar W."

They topped the last rise and kept on riding hard.

"Don't worry about Bonny!" Jim yelled to Yancy. "She'll have sense enough to take cover when the shooting starts."

Gunfire opened on them before they were down the slant. Pete Morton had recognized the little roan and Jim Hendrick's claybank, and had known that Yancy Porter was bucking his game.

The two riders ignored the withering fire and rode a zigzag to the pole corrals. Flinging themselves to the ground, they returned the fire and started bellying their way toward the barn where Morton and four others holed up for their stand.

The feel of the six-guns aroused strange memories in Yancy Porter's hands, and the memories kindled long-forgotten skills. As the gun handles bucked, the years peeled away, and the old killer thrill burned hotly in his brain.

Pete Morton had hoped for a slow, wearing fight from good cover, and this Yancy did not mean to allow him.

Sensing this futility, Morton's hardcases climbed to their knees, firing madly through the open barn door. Yancy doubled up Rice with a slug and then sent hot lead accurately to the brain of Whitey. Hendricks fired the carbine from his hip, a cool, furious man that Bonny could be proud of. Jim picked off the other two, then there was only Pete Morton left.

"Mine, Jim!" Yancy yelped.

Pete Morton came forward with six-guns blazing. Yancy took a slug in his hip, feeling its bitter jolt in each of his ancient bones, then his own spewing weapon knocked Morton to the ground. . .

IT WAS the next day before Yancy felt like thinking. His hip wound ached like fury, and there had been the violent reaction that followed his brief lapse from the long, peaceful years. So, lying

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on a bed in the big ranchhouse, Yancy was finally ready to think. The sawbones had been there and fixed his wound. The coroner and sheriff had been out and that was all squared away. Jim and Bonny were down in the kitchen, making big plans. Jim's spread joined the Bar W, and combined it would make a wonderful set-up.

Yancy pulled back the curtain at the window, and, looking to the west, emitted a sigh. In his heart he knew he wouldn't get away as fast as he had thought he would, at first. Old flesh healed slowly, but there was something else. He had been tempted to tarry the first time because he had never made a wooden leg and could not resist the chance to make one.

He was stopped again, for a long while, and he knew it. For Yancy Porter had never yet made a cradle, either, and if he hung around long enough he might get the chance.

Powder-smoke Showdown

(Continued from page 25)

Galbraith's hand snaked to the sheriff's holster. Ives' gun roared once. Galbraith twisted slowly around, collapsed in the sand.

THE SHERIFF sent two of his men to see if they could find any cache where the money might be hidden, then walked with Ives up the canyon.

They found Pengally's body. Not counting the wound in the leg, where Ives had clipped him, there were three bullet holes in Pengally's chest.

"He was close-shot," explained Ives. "Galbraith's work, and that explains a lot of things. Galbraith was the leader and Donahue and Pengally were his followers. Gullible fools—too gullible, as it turned out."

The old lawman broke in: "I allus figured Galbraith a smart hombre. 'Course I ain't surprised at him bein' mixed up in a holdup and killin', but I don't savvy why he'd tangle up in any kidnappin'. Too risky for a calculatin' skunk like he was."

"That's the point. Galbraith came back to town with his two followers. That was smarter than trying to run off with the swag. But Galbraith was afraid Donahue and Pengally might talk too much. Yesterday in the Last Chance, Galbraith had to stop Donahue from shooting off his trap—did it in a very drastic manner."

"Rufe told me about him shootin' through Ben's hat," said the sheriff.

Ives went on: "Galbraith's idea was then to get rid of Donahue and Pengally. Simply by killing them and calmly admitting the fact. His excuse would be that he had to do it to save Jean from two vicious kidnappers. No doubt, it was at Galbraith's suggestion that those two black devils did waylay the girl. Maybe Galbraith persuaded them that they needed her as a shield if they had any trouble with a posse following them when they cleared off with the swag."

McPherson nodded understanding. "That way, Galbraith would own all the loot. The money must be near here. I'll have men keep huntin' for it. Anyway, nobody can safely profit from it, because Denver's got a record of the serial numbers on the bills. I doubt if anybody'll tamper with that silver."

THE lawman and the tall drifter walked back to the others. Jean Shipley sat straight in her saddle, between Rufe Yeager's mount and the horse carrying her dead husband.

Somebody had fetched Ives' roan. The tall drifter put his hand on the saddle.

Sheriff McPherson rubbed the back of his ear ruefully, said: "I been needin'

me a good two-handed deputy. The town needs you, too, Walt."

Walt Ives looked to the west. "I thought maybe I'd be drifting back to California."

Jean Shipley looked down from her saddle at Ives. Her eyes said: "Stay."

Walt Ives grinned at the sheriff. "As long as you're top man around here, your word is law with me." Ives nosed his horse toward the town.

Jerkline Joe's Holiday

(Continued from page 33)

THE Yellow Desert spread out like a mysterious frozen sea beneath the pale light of stars that shed only the faintest radiance. Dunes rose like giant billowing waves, with here and there open stretches supporting a meager growth of signal cactus, and scrub creosote.

Jerkline Joe rode alone, angling through the desolation toward the dry-wash that had swallowed Bull Burke's big freighter. A coyote howled faintly somewhere out in the wastes, and Jerkline felt his muscles jerk.

"Dang you," he grunted softly, "you're wuss'n an old woman. You'd think Jim had never handled himself in a tight place before. He warn't born yistiddy, but yuh act like you were. Now ca'm down and git on about your business."

His business was reaching the wash undetected by any eyes that might be watching. They'd worked out the details of their plan before leaving San Bernardino, and it was simple enough. Big Jim was to ride the length of Main Street, for any interested observers to see, and continue on out the stage road to the dry-wash. Circling the town, Jerkline was to cut across the Yellow Desert, and hit the barranca a half mile or more from the main road.

"I'll be ahead of you," Big Jim summed up, "and if some of Catlett's cutthroats nab me, they'll all tag along to wherever

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they're holding Bill Burke and his wagon. Won't any of 'em be expectin' you to show up, so they won't be takin' any pains to cover their tracks. The only thing is"—his brow had clouded—"you're going to be one man against heaven knows how many."

"There won't be more'n two or three," Jerkline had grunted. "The deal's shady all way around, and tongues have got a bad habit of waggin' even if they have been paid off."

And now as he neared the neighborhood of the dry-wash, Jerkline Joe Masters hoped that he was right. He wasn't thinking of himself, and he was too old to worry about dying. His thoughts, as he halted in the deep shadows of a tall sand-ridge to survey the empty desert before him, was for young Bill Burke and Big Jim Thompson. They were the pair that deserved the chance to keep on going ahead in this new state.

"Without cusses like Catlett tryin' to whittle 'em down to size," he ruminated.

The desert ahead appeared empty. The only sound that touched his ears was the sighing of a chill wind that swept down nightly from the towering bulk of the snow-capped San Bernardino Mountains to eastward.

Jerkline eased the mare forward to the rim of the gulch, and let her find a slow way down the steep bank. Looping the reins over his arm, he swung down, and stepped ahead of his mount. He focused his eyes downward, and the dim starlight was enough to show him the blacker markings of hoofprints breaking the smooth sand.

It was all a man needed to see, for here and there the iron tires of the loaded freighter had cut a deeper groove into the sand. Jerkline mounted, and he let the mare pick her own way on down the wash. He patted her withers.

"Dunno how much farther you're goin' to have to take me, Blackie," he muttered, "and I dunno who'll be ridin' you back home ag'in, but I hope it's Jerkline Joe Masters. Straighten out this mess, by gosh, and we're still goin' to take us a *pasear* over Kern way and smell some pine trees!"

The tracks kept stretching out ahead along the twisting wash. They were in the heart of the wastelands now where nothing lived but lizards and sidewinders and badmen.

Eyes staring steadily ahead, Jerkline searched the rim of the wash and the dunes on either side for a tracing of light. "Them devils ain't goin' to be settin' in the dark wherever they've holed up," he told himself.

And then the mare stumbled rounding a dark bend in the wash. Stumbled, went to her knees, and Jerkline felt himself arcing through space. His mount had fallen so suddenly that he hadn't even had time to make a grab for the horn of his saddle. The only time he'd even seen anything similar happen was when he'd watched a horse tripped by stepping into a wire—and Jerkline Joe Masters knew while his body was still in the air that the mare had done exactly that.

Catlett's cutthroats had left an unseen strand of steel to guard their rendezvous.

AS the thought crossed his mind, Jerkline felt himself strike on one shoulder and roll. But even as his body hit and sand got between his teeth and up his nose, he was reaching for the Colt on his hip. "More'n one way to play a game!" Jerkline muttered, and the long weapon left leather, disappeared down the open top of his boot.

Groggy from the shock of the fall, he looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps. Sand stung the corners of his eyes, and he spat more of it from his mouth as a man loomed on either side of him.

One of them chuckled. "Hell, it's grandpa! I knew he warn't nosin' around this afternoon jest for his health."

The voice belonged to the road-guard who had put a bullet alongside his head. Jerkline recognized the tones and groaned. "Every danged bone in my old body is bruck," he said querulously, "and I lost my danged gun when I got pitched, or else I'd sure drill you gents where yuh stand!"

"Take a look around for his gun, Mike,"

the trail-guard snapped, "then come on back to the dugout. We still ain't made Burke or Thompson tell us whereat they hid Bert Quade's gold in that damned load of flour and stuff fillin' the wagon."

"Mebbe this old coot will know," the other man suggested. "He's a Caravan teamster."

"I don't know nothin'," Jerkline groaned, and it was hard for him to keep the satisfaction out of his voice, for their talk had told him that Bill Burke and Big Jim were at least alive. They'd also told him something else that he hadn't considered. There was no honor amongst thieves. Never had meen, and even a partner might double-cross a pard for a pot of a hundred thousand in gold of the realm. It wouldn't be hard, Jerkline reasoned, for Catlett to collect that cash and tell Quade that Thompson had actually gotten away with it. A man could fool his partner just as easy as he could fool the public—and a judge.

He felt the road-guard's hand grab his collar. "Git up, you old fossil," he growled. "Ain't nothin' hurt but your feelin's. A tech of a good hot brandin' iron will fix that!"

A bubbling cry, that a man in pain couldn't repress, emphasized his words.

The guard chuckled. "That's Anse," he drawled, "tattooin' Burke's toes a mite."

Jerkline Joe twisted like an angry catamount and pulled back his feet. He let them go with a kick, straight at the road-guard's middle. "An' that's for me," he grunted. "I hope yuh remember it in hell!"

THE kick hoisted his pants legs above his boot-tops, and his long old Colt slid out as though it was trying to find his fingers. Jerkline grabbed it, and weaved to his feet as the road-guard went over backward, all the air knocked from his body.

"Hey, what's goin' on—?" The one called Mike whirled from his search.

"Why I done found my gun in my boot," Jerkline drawled. "I'm lucky, but you ain't!"

He fired as the other clawed for his Colt and buck-jumped sidewise as lead

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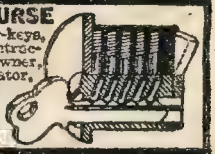

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whipped out at him from the open front of the crude dugout they'd cut into the bank of the wash. Cherry-red flames licked dry sticks in the center of the dugout's floor, and Jerkline made out the crouched shape of Anse Catlett. Flame spurted from the man's hand again, and Jerkline felt the sting of the bullet as it perforated his shirt just below his ribs.

He thumbed the hammer of his Colt, and the big weapon roared. The half-ounce slug seemed to lift Catlett to his toes.

"We'd have split—" The three words left his lips in a bubbly groan, and then his body hinged in the middle and he was pitching forward toward the coals of the fire.

"Yeah, we'd have split," Jerkline growled. "Like hell. You and Quade would've split a heap more than a hundred thousand if you'd played the game square with him. But I'm sure glad you didn't!"

Big Jim Thompson's grim voice echoed him. "Double those sentiments, Joe," he seconded. "If I'd told Catlett that I took that strong-box and tossed it in a peck of flour there'd have been no stoppin' him until he'd busted open every barrel in the wagon. Then Prescott folks would be minus their biscuits next month."

"And you'd be minus yore hair," Jerkline grunted. He stooped and lightly tapped the stirring road-guard over the head. "This'n," he grunted, "will likely tie in Quade when he gits afore a jedge. An' when he does, that cussed moneylender will likely be ready to follow his gold to Prescott."

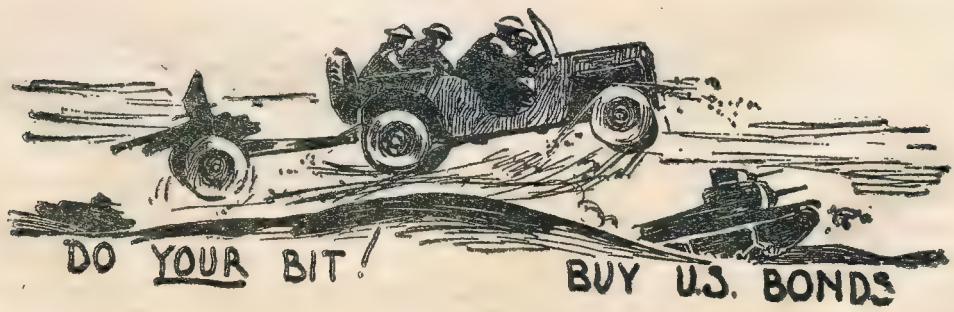
Bill Burke's face was beaded with pain-sweat when Jerkline bent to slash the rawhide thongs binding his arms and legs, but there was still a smile in his eyes for the old ribbon-popper.

"Young Bill," he said grinning, "is sure going to just about pop when he hears how you spent your holiday!"

Jerkline looked down at them, and his white brows were bristling. "Hell," he said explosively, "I jest wanted it understood that this was one of these here interludes, or I'll leave you both tied up. Yup, I promised that thar Blackie mare of mine that we'd git ourselves a whiff of pine air or bust. And I ain't got any hankerin' to bust. Only thing is, as that old cuss, Tomcat Jenkins sez, it's goin' to be a mite lonesome without nobody to gab with."

Big Jim was grinning, and his eyes were twinkling. "Bill, here," he drawled, "ain't goin' to be able to git around very good for awhile, but I imagine he could sling harness on a stage hitch a coupla times a day. Mebbe Tomcat needs a little rest, too."

Jerkline Joe Masters reached down to untie his boss, and his old face was working like a kid about to bawl. "Why, Jim," his voice was just a little choked, "now that yuh mention it, Tomcat could stand a holiday too. 'Sides, Bill's a danged good cook, and I ain't never been much of a hand with a fry-pan. . . . Yup, that thar plan suits me fine. Jerkline Joe's holiday, I got a feelin', is goin' to turn out all right!"



The Bonetown Gun-Swindle

(Continued from page 49)

Joe called anxiously. "An' what am I gonna do about that Injun? He's owly-drunk."

"Then *keep* him drunk!" Match called back. And he rode west, at the buckskin's top speed.

TWO MILES out of town the west grade began its tortuous descent to the mid-county valleys. Mitch picked a likely stock trail that canted up a pine-crested ridge, and turned the buckskin into it. Reaching the trees, he rode along more slowly, watching below. In many places the stage road twisted out of sight, but here and there its yellow gash showed in the brush and trees.

The stock trail petered out and Mitch had to cross a steep gully, then followed another ridge. Lower down the pines thinned, but brush grew tall. He kept one eye on the buckskin's ears. When they pointed sharply forward and held that way, while a soft nicker came from the animal, he dismounted quickly and led the horse into a sheltered hollow. He went ahead then on foot, with one of the old five-shot guns out ready.

"This all may lead to nothing—or again, it may lead to more than I expect!" Mitch told himself. "At least the stage johnny must be right. That there's a Concord due up the grade *poco pronto*. . . ."

Apparently the agent knew whereof he spoke, because Mitch heard the dry rattle of wheels on gravel about three seconds before he spotted the horsemen bunched in a draw near the road. He counted them off. Seven men, waiting to hold up the stage. All wore bandanna masks, but the one in the high white hat was unquestionably John Biddle. It would be nice, Mitch reflected, to peg a shot down into their midst, just to watch the scramble. But such was not in his plan.

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stage," he reflected in a murmur, as he crouched in the brush. "I'll see if these younger men have added any wrinkles."

Biddle remembered the give-away hat in time and threw it into the brush just as the stage showed around the bend. The spot was well-chosen, Mitch conceded, as he watched the stage slow to a crawl in order to cross a washed-out place in the road. With the lead span coming over the small bank and the Concord almost motionless, Biddle's men rode out into sight and quickly separated. One cut two shots in quick succession over the driver's head.

The whole thing was a steal. The stage company posted a shotgun guard on outbound trips, but in the history of Juliana there had never been a hold-up coming in. The driver slammed on his brake lever, wound the lines around it, then elevated both hands above his hat brim. Biddle and one of his pards rode close to the side door and Mitch could hear harsh orders barked, though words were not distinguishable.

Mitch glued his eyes on the stage door as five men climbed stiffly down. Three were expensively dressed in dark business suits, two in more standard back-country attire. Mitch promptly sorted out the country men as not worthy of notice, returning his gaze to the others with keen interest. A lanky one and a fat one each wore elegant plug hats which they set awry in their haste to get their hands above their heads. The last man was short, hunched and obviously old; but though he wore a suit similar to the other pair, his feet were thrust into riding boots and his hat was a much-battered cowman's Stetson.

"When a man gets rich as that little old duck," Mitch mumbled, "he can forget convention and begin to act natural again."

The old man didn't elevate his hands, but bawled something up to the driver that sounded like a swear word, then started clawing at his hip. He fought like a pair of wildcats when three of Biddle's gunmen dropped on him. They had a tussle to subdue him, at that. Mitch grinned in appreciation.

A moment later Biddle motioned the country men back into the stage. When they had obeyed he signaled the driver to proceed, which that worthy promptly did, scarcely even glancing back at his three stranded passengers.

IT WAS almost sundown when John Biddle, still masked, strode out of the dilapidated log cabin where his three kidnap victims had been herded. It was several miles back in the hills from the road, and north of town. Mitch Jarvis lay on his belly behind a large flat rock and peered across the meadow.

Biddle was still masked. He turned in the doorway and spoke loudly to his prisoners. The smooth polish was gone from his speech:

"You three old billygoats can stay here, till I make up my mind what to do with you. And thanks for stopping at Los Angeles to send a telegram. Kind of upset my plans when I learned you were back on your pins, Sam, and headed this way. *Adios*, and stay in the cabin. I'm leaving two men, with orders to put a bullet in the first head that shows outside door or window!"

A slightly quavering voice came from within. "I can't count on that worthless son of mine to get us out of this mess, you polecat. But old Grady Tucker'll skin the hide off you when he finds what you did to Sam Biddle!"

John Biddle's only answer was a jarring laugh as he climbed aboard his horse. In a minute more he rode out of sight down a dim trail, flanked by four of his gun-packing friends. The two left on guard made themselves comfortable, facing the cabin, with their backs against trees. Each had a rifle across his lap.

Mitch rose up cautiously behind his rock, stretching first one leg and then the other. He sighed quietly, from the long hours of trailing and hiding. He had waited an extra half hour after Biddle's departure, for safety's cake.

For a ponderous man, he could move quietly. With one gun in hand, disdaining the other, he inched forward. Both guards were engaged in rolling smokes. Mitch stepped behind the closest one and brought his gun down, butt first, and

hard. It crunched on bone and the man slumped. The other lurched to his knees, his mouth round with a snarled curse of surprise. His rifle barrel swung up and ejected flame and noise.

Mitch, still moving with momentum, was jerking his body around at the same time. The rifle slug burned across his back, in the fleshy part, low down. The .41 spun in a fast twirl and Mitch triggered fast. The gunman collapsed forward over his rifle.

Mitch ignored the three men who came spilling from the cabin. The first two were still trying to keep the plug hats in place, while the third had removed his battered sombrero to reveal a round and naked poll. The trio stood in a row and stared, while Mitch dragged the unconscious gunman around the corner to a small shed that had no windows. He dumped the man inside, found a log and propped the door solidly shut. Then he coolly walked out front.

"Gentlemen, my name is Hobbs. Major Stockton Hobbs," he said with dignity. "Will somebody please take a look at my back?"

CHAPTER VI

Boomtown Benefit

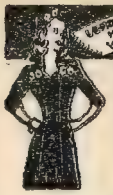
THE rougher element of Juliana occupied every one of the three hundred seats of the Bella Frontier Theater, as well as jamming the aisles, the balcony rail, and even the steps that led up at each end of the stage. Out on the street the silk-shirt gentry and their ladies, the *bon ton*, were bluntly informed by a gun-packing usher that not another human being could possibly squeeze inside.

Backstage, a scared and trembling Canary Tucker approached Joe Lately with stern words. The girl's eyes blazed.

"Mr. Lately, we've got to let my society friends in to see the show. They all swear they bought tickets, and now they can't get in!"

Joe Lately wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. He looked sick and worried, answered the girl almost absently:

"Sure they got tickets. So have the



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ones inside. Is this a benefit, or ain't it? Look. I sold one batch of tickets marked eight o'clock. I sold a second batch marked eight-thirty. If I'd placed the early ones with your friends out front, they'd of got here first and these others would of walked in anyhow and tore the place apart. But nobody's takin' seats away from those boys that got 'em now—and them society folks is too polite to make much of a row. They wanted to support your benefit, and that's what they're doin', whether they see the show or not. The tough ones want to see the show, and to hell with the benefit. And you got a double take, with the money all tucked away. *You* got no worries, Miss Canary. It's me that's got 'em. Where the deuce is Mitch—I mean Major Hobbs?"

"You've asked me about twenty-five times since last night," the girl reminded him. "Personally, I'm just as well satisfied the fat old Major walked out on us. I pinned my faith in the wrong man, Mr. Lately. I should have talked with you in the first place. You're simply wonderful!"

Though somewhat mollified by this admission, Joe did not lose his worried countenance. "I'm glad your father's better, ma'am, and pleased he was able to name the man that shot him as that same one *he* shot later on. No doubt Burl Fenton will come back from Mexico some day, and—"

He was interrupted by four young men who ran off-stage with loud whoops to finish their act, one dragging the other three bunched together within his lariat noose.

"It's my turn!" Canary said.

She waved her hand to Joe and tripped out onto the stage, where she was greeted by energetic cheers and whistles. Joe peered out, still wishing he knew what had happened to Mitch. He had turned over the ticket money to Canary, and it now occurred to him that he might just as well have skipped with it, as long as Mitch was not on hand to argue the point.

John Biddle was seated in the middle of the first row, having gone out from backstage at the girl's insistence. His starched white shirt was a beacon in the row of woolens, denim and leather jackets. John Biddle was the only "swell" who had managed to get inside. He was looking at Canary as she sang her lilting ballad, but from the blank expression on his face he was somewhere else mentally.

Joe watched Canary finish her song and turn a pirouette into the opposite wing. And Mitch Jarvis was there, suavely meeting the girl!

"Very fine, young lady. Kr-umph, yes! Lovely voice." Mitch's own tone was hearty as the applause dwindled. "They'd like an encore, my dear."

Canary backed into stage center. She smiled and began another song. Mitch strolled across the stage, beaming and nodding to the audience. He came on through to confront Joe Lately. Once in the shelter of the canvas his suavity vanished, and Joe saw the beads of sweat on his brow.

"Where's the Chief?" Mitch demanded. "Did you keep him drunk, like I ordered?"

Joe nodded, his chin still droping. "He's around, Mitch. Where in—"

"Get that Indian on the stage!" Mitch cut in tersely. "And listen, Joe—" He talked rapidly for several minutes, then handed over a paper covered with scrawled notes. He gripped Joe's arm in steel fingers. "No slips, *sabe?*"

"N-no slips," Joe echoed. There was deep awe on his lean face.

A FEW chairs were arranged at one end of the stage. The chairs supported the two young ladies who had danced earlier on the program, the rope-spinning cowboys, Canary Tucker, Tonopah Smith and John Biddle. Chief September Horse squatted against the back curtain, swaying in wooden-faced rhythm to the monotonous thud of his war drum. His eyes were closed and his wrinkled lips moved to drunken bumblings. Joe Lately was not in evidence.

Major Stockton Hobbs faced the audience, looking like a pompous gentleman with a mild hangover. He raised his voice above the drum!

"Friends, I give you September Horse,

venerable Chief of the Yoguts! Ready to give you a rare exhibition of his remarkable powers as a seer, prophet and prognosticator. Kr-umph, yes! I have asked the assistance of two honorable gentlemen of the community. We must have strict quiet in the house while Mr. Biddle and Mr. Smith concentrate their minds. Ready, gentlemen?"

"Ready," Sheriff Smith growled.

"Get on with it," Biddle assented shortly. His air was disdainful.

Mitch carefully extinguished the footlights, then focused a green-lensed carriage lamp on September Horse. It bathed him in a ghostly glow, with startling effect. The audience stared, fascinated, while girls on the stage gasped.

For one full minute there was no sound save the eerie dull thunder of the drum. A spectral voice lifted then, above the insistent noise: "Tonopah-h-h Smith! Him think of a man who escape from jail. That man go away, two man come back. I see Burl Fenton, I see bad outlaw. . . . John Biddle think of outlaw—think outlaw die Los Angeles pretty quick hang by the neck! But him no die."

"The Injun's loco," Smith blurted in the darkness. "I wasn't thinkin'—"

"Neither was I," Biddle snarled. His voice was strangely cracked. "Hobbs, stop this crazy hodgepodge—!"

"Must have quiet!" the droning voice cut in. "Two men come here now. Very-y-y close!"

Mitch Jarvis fumbled at the carriage lamp, removing a shroud that let a glaring beam spot the right wing. The crowd's gaze automatically jerked that way. Two men stood there, blinking in the light!

A girl on the stage screamed. Sheriff Tonopah Smith swore in disbelief, and John Biddle uttered a choked exclamation. Someone in the crowd below bawled hoarsely: "Burl Fenton—and the outlaw! Who is he? Wh—"

"Stay where you're at, Fenton!" Tonopah roared. "I got a gun—"

"White man shut up!" the spectral voice commanded. The Chief still swayed there, eyes closed, lips moving. His right hand continued to beat the drum.

"Yesterday stage driver say three old

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men ride Concord up west grade. Men with masks stop stage, take off old fogies. Sheriff Tonopah Smith wonder what happen, but too lazy to find out. Man go by name of John Biddle, *him know!*"

And abruptly John Biddle's voice grated harshly. "That's a lie! I don't—"

"Snake with forked tongue always call lie," September Horse gave back, while the audience heaved in their seats, beginning to mutter. "You know plenty how Grady Tucker get shot. You know plenty about young man with Burl Fenton. You know why three old men get off stage. But only September Horse know where those three old men now."

The Chief paused and Biddle's choked voice cut the silence: "All right, Indian. Where are they?"

"They stand in other wings!"

The crowd drew in its collective breath—and Mitch Jarvis instantly uncovered another carriage lamp to focus its beam across the stage. And there the three 'Frisco bankers stood—two in elegant beaver hats, the other a runty ancient in a battered cowman's sombrero.

It was Canary Tucker's voice this time that raised in that tense silence, "Sam—Sam Biddle, Otis Markey, and—"

In the same second the young man with Fenton blurted hoarsely; one word that echoed through the theater:

"Dad!"

Tonopah Smith was the next to bawl tumbled words in the gloom. "So *that's* Sam Biddle's son! Then this other feller—"

A crunching thud cut his voice short, followed by the crash of chairs. A dimly seen figure leaped, women screamed, men shouted. A gun spat flame and Mitch Jarvis staggered at stage center, uttering a grunt of pain. Chief September Horse came alive with a wild and inhuman whoop. He shed his blanket and stumbled to his feet. Naked to the waist, he pranced into the milling tangle, swinging a whiskey bottle.

Burl Fenton stood coolly in the spotlight, snatching for his gun. He raised it carefully and fired two quick shots across the stage. Wild pandemonium raged among the audience.

IT WAS Joe Lately who ran in from backstage, to skitter along the row of footlights with a match. In a minute the stage was brilliantly lighted, revealing much. September Horse snored on the boards, well trussed with a lariat. One of the cowboys was astride his naked torso. The two young ladies had fainted dead away, and the sullen young man who had come in with Fenton was clutching in a bear hug the sombreroed oldster. From the eyes of both coursed unashamed tears.

The man who had been known as John Biddle lay sprawled against the footlights, blood splotching his fine silk shirt. Canary Tucker stared at him in horror. Mitch Jarvis, slightly pale and one hand pressing his side, stepped close to the girl.

"Don't waste sympathy on him, young lady. His real name was Dillon Karns. This was to be his slickest swindle. The Lazy Queen Mine with its rich new vein, John Biddle's fat inheritance—and a lovely canary, maybe."

"So that's Karns, hey?" Tonopah Smith stood behind them, tenderly fondling a huge lump on his head. "I got word a month ago that Dillon Karns was jailed in Los Angeles, waiting the noose. How in Sam Hill did he get crossed up with John Biddle?"

"John's ready to tell his part of the story," old Sam said tersely.

The young man stepped forward, his eyes on Mitch in frank awe. "Yeah, if I hadn't been a fool, Karns'd never had his chance for this. On the way down here last month I got swacked in a Los Angeles saloon that's known as an outlaw hideaway. I gambled with Dillon Karns, blabbed all my business—how dad was deathly sick, and all about the Lazy Queen, and how I was coming down here. Karns fed me knockout drops, after I busted his nose in a brawl. He exchanged clothes with me—then engineered a tip-off to the law that 'Karns' could be taken in his sleep. You see, nobody could identify Karns.

"I woke up in jail. Never knew what I was in for until Burl Fenton showed up at the jail with fight talk last night, and I was too ashamed to tell my name. Burl

dang near got shot bustin' me outo that jail, but here we are. Karns didn't know what a tough rooster Sam Biddle is—and he sure didn't figure on the Major here!"

Someone in the audience whistled loudly and young Biddle gulped. Then he saw the cheering wasn't for what he said. An unshaven, trail-dirty Burl Fenton was folding Canary Tucker in his arms. Over her shoulder, Burl winked broadly at the spectators.

And then, a minute later, little old Sam Biddle was getting in his two bits' worth:

"The Lazy Queen Mine at Bonetown is reopened—as of now! Grady Tucker'll run 'er pretty soon, with Fenton as foreman as before. Maybe they'll let John handle the business end of a shovel—if he behaves himself!"

Mitch Jarvis made the last spiel, sonorously, "Folks, the Bonetowners won't be needing any benefit money now—but anybody who figures he didn't get a real show here tonight better see Miss Tucker for a refund. Otherwise, she and Grady can sure use the funds for the first month's expense on the new shaft. . . ."

The roaring cheer was answer enough. When Canary broke away from Burl Fenton to offer her belated thanks, Mitch had already been dragged off-stage by a woe ful Joe Lately.

"Look, Mitch," the little man moaned. "I can hardly whisper after readin' all that stuff you wrote down, pretendin' it was the drunk Injun's palaver. But I want to know one thing."

"What's that, Joe?"

"Looks like everybody won out on your smart work—except us! Blast it, Mitch, we're as broke as when we hit this town—"

"Are we?" Mitch inquired. The big man was grinning. He hauled out a roll of bills large enough to start a bank. "What's wrong with this?"

Joe's eyes nearly burst their sockets. "What'd you do—*make* it?"

"In a way," Mitch said. "How do you think I kept those pious bankers in that cabin, after polishing off the guards? We played poker all night! Somebody had to

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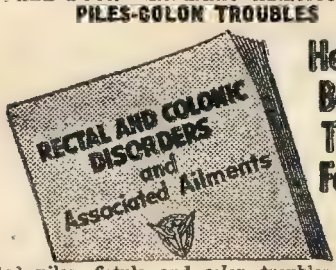

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win, didn't he? Now come on, Joe. I'll get that medico to patch up this rib scratch, and one on my back. Then I want to pay respects to old Grady Tucker before we shake the dust of Juliana off our feet. Old September Horse can have the wagon and stuff, with our compliments, eh? Maybe he can taper off a three-day drunk on Redwood Elixir. It ought to be good for *something*."

Tombstone Nemesis

(Continued from page 55)

hand to the kid's arm. "This town has had enough riddles for one day, lad. Better come over to the Ace an' have a drink. There's an eatin' counter in the back. I'll have somebody put up yore team at the livery."

WHEN EZRA HUMES reached the Ace Saloon it was nearly dark, and he found Luke Reeves, the young wagon driver, at the bar with Sheriff Hipple on one side of him and the four gunnies on the other side. Esteban, the fat Mexican, was seated at a table in the corner sipping a glass of beer and assiduously polishing his old forty-four.

"Say, kid." Ezra shouldered his way to the bar. "Did you happen to see a redheaded rider on the trail today?"

The kid grinned over his glass and said, "Shore. I'm lookin' at one right now." He was looking at his own reflection in the mirror of the back bar. He did have red hair.

Ezra swore. "This ain't funny," he snapped. "There's been a lot of trouble on this range. The sheriff figures I ought to do his job for him. He's been suspectin' some gents in town here, but can't prove nothing. I reckon the redhead who paid for Sam's funeral could clear up a lot of things."

Just then Robert Howard, the banker, came into the saloon. He wore a black frock coat and a high hat, and his square, serious face was clouded. He went directly up to Luke Reeves.

"What's this I hear about you havin' a draft on the bank for two thousand dollars in gold?"

"That's right." The kid grinned, drawing a piece of paper from the pocket of his jumper. "It's all right, ain't it?" he added, holding the draft out for the banker's inspection.

"That's a lot of money!" Howard snorted. "How you goin' to git it back to Ludlow?"

"In my wagon. Ain't no thieves goin' to stop me unless somebody tips 'em off about the money."

Howard flushed. "What gives you the idea that anybody here will tip them off?" he asked angrily.

"You did." The kid grinned.

Howard's face flushed deeper but he didn't continue the argument. "I'll have the money for you in the morning," he said fiercely and strode out.

Sheriff Hipple said gravely, "I reckon that two thousand in gold is goin' to squeeze Bob Howard right smart. He's got most of his cash tied up in paper held against the ranchers who have been losing heavily to rustlers. The ranchers can't pay, an' it ain't quite time for Howard to start foreclosing on them. In the long run he stands to come out on top in this business."

Luke Reeves chuckled. "Him an' Ezra is doin' all right. Ezra gets to bury the corpses, and—"

"Hold yore tongue, kid!" Ezra's bony face purpled with rage. "You hintin' I'm in on the lawbreaking?"

"Just a joke," Luke said. "Sheriff, why don't you swear in a flock of deputies an' clean up this business?"

"Can't get no deputies since them U.S. marshals was killed. Can't even get any more marshals to come up here," Hipple lamented.

Luke pulled out a big roll of bills and insisted on paying for the drinks. Then he called Esteban and they went out to the cafe in the rear of the saloon to eat.

AS he returned to the saloon, Luke passed a card table where three of Ezra's gun-slinging friends and Paddy Long were playing cards. Paddy looked up with his kindly face and smiled at the kid.

"Won't you join us in a friendly game of cards, lad?" Paddy asked in his most reverent voice.

"Don't mind if I do," the kid agreed and slid into a chair.

Ezra drifted over to watch the game, and took a place behind the kid. Ezra's back was toward the mirror and he held his hands behind his back so that the man opposite the kid could see them. Luke won the first two pots and jubilantly shoved the money into his left-hand pocket. But when he played the next hand, he bet with money off his roll on the table.

He lost the next two hands. It came his deal and his slim fingers slid slowly around the deck. He dealt around, looked at his hand and found he had three fours, and an ace and a lone ten. He discarded the ten and after dealing the other men their draw, he dropped one card before himself but failed to turn it up.

"I'll raise the bet ten bucks." He grinned as it came his turn to bet.

"You haven't looked at yore card." Paddy Long smiled benevolently.

The kid shrugged and blinked through his specs. "What's the use, it's all a matter of luck, ain't it?"

Paddy looked impatiently at the mirror in which he could see Ezra Hume's hands behind his back. Ezra signaled that the kid was bluffing, had only the three fours and one ace to play.

The other men raised the bet and the kid doubled it. Paddy was determined to see the kid's hand and called. The kid turned up his face-down card. It was an ace, giving him a full house and the pot.

"How the hell did you know that was an ace?" Paddy asked—not so benevolently this time.

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ter. I felt by the edges," the kid said calmly.

Ezra broke the awkward silence by laughing, and saying, "That's sure one on you, Paddy. Beat at your own game!"

The kid carefully scooped up his winnings and put them into the left-hand pocket of his levis. His original roll of money he put back into his right-hand pocket.

"Reckon I'll go to bed, gents. Got a long drive ahead of me in the morning."

TEN MINUTES after the kid had left the saloon, Ezra Humes and Paddy Long were on their way over to the undertaking parlor where the banker, Howard, impatiently paced the floor.

"Where the eternal hell you been?" Howard greeted them.

Ezra explained about the card game in which the kid had come off winner by discovering the marked cards. "It was a joke on Paddy," Ezra cackled. "He was too plumb surprised to even let out a holler."

"The joke might be on all of us," the banker snapped. "I don't like any of the things that have happened here since last night. Sam Mathews was my best rep. Who killed him?"

"Reckon it was the gent who paid for his funeral." Ezra shrugged. "Sam was always tryin' to play the game all by himself."

"Then there's this business of the headstone and the nearsighted kid with the draft for two thousand dollars gold. Gold! There's a catch in it somewheres, but I don't know where. I reckon we'd better play the game to our own advantage. I'll give the kid the gold. You have two men, masked, at the turn near Nelly Spring. You follow the wagon and see the kid don't stop and hide the gold. We'll steal the two thousand back, the bank-insurance company will pay off, and if the red-hai ed hombre shows up to find out why we sent the headstone back, we'll frame him for the whole business."

The next morning the kid was at the bank when it opened, all hitched up and ready to roll. Banker Howard waited on him in person, and handed over nearly ten pounds of gold coins in a small leather sack.

"Hope you make it safe, son," he said as he accepted the draft and had the kid sign for the money.

"Who'd stop an old work team an' a couple of tramp drivers, sir?"

"You can never tell," the banker warned. "You were talking rather loud around town yesterday. Word of what you're carrying might have got to wrong hombres."

"I'll bet you two to one I don't get robbed," the kid offered, grinning until his freckles merged about his nose.

Something in the kid's tone jarred the banker, who forced a smile and replied, "I'm not a gambler, son. I risk money only on good security."

From the shelter of the funeral parlor Ezra Humes watched the kid emerge from the bank and toss the leather bag into the wagon as though it contained nothing of value, and then jog up the team on the road out of town.

Carefully, Humes followed, mounted on one of his hearse horses which could easily keep up with the plodding work team. Ezra kept behind, out of sight, but he made sure the kid didn't stop the team and remove the money from the wagon. When the wagon did get out of sight as it wound down the crooked road through the cedars, Ezra could tell by the sound that it did not stop rolling.

SOON THEY were nearing Nelly Springs and Ezra whipped up his nag and made a wide detour around the wagon. Ezra came out behind a clump of rabbit sage on the edge of the springs. There he found Paddy Long and two gunnies waiting. When he warned them that the wagon was near, they pulled down their masks and rode out to the road. Ezra remained hidden in the rabbit sage.

The wagon clattered into view. The kid, wearing a big oversized jumper against the cold of early morning, slouched in the seat. The fat Esteban dozed beside him.

Paddy spurred his horse out and stopped the team. "Don't make no

monkeyshines!" His voice was a lash, now. "Relax and you won't get hurt, kid. We want the two thousand dollars you're carryin'."

The kid had jerked to attention and now his hands went up. "I ain't got no money, honest, mister," he protested.

The two masked gunnies slid around to either side of the wagon, their guns ready.

"Get out of there, both of you," Paddy ordered. "Walk over there a hundred feet." He pointed to an open spot to the left of the road.

When Luke and Esteban had complied, the three men began to search the wagon. They found nothing of the gold. They tore the tarp from the headstone and heaved it overboard, but still no sign of the leather sack.

Finally, Ezra Humes, impatient with the delay, hobbled through the tall brush with his black handkerchief tied about his face. He had some misguided notion the mask would disguise him.

"What the tarnation's takin' you so long?" he demanded.

"The dinero ain't here. We've looked everyplace," Paddy Long said, straightening up.

Ezra climbed to the wheel of the wagon, his scrawny neck stuck out as he inspected the wagonbed.

"Mebbe it's under the headstone?" he suggested.

Don't be a fool," Paddy Long snarled, suspecting that he was being a fool himself, "that headstone weighs two tons. Are you sure you didn't see them hide the dinero?"

Ezra's face colored. "Are you insinuatin' that I lied?"

"Well where's the money?" Paddy growled.

"Why don't we ask the kid?" Ezra suggested. "He might have it hid on his body, him an' the Mex. . . ."

"And he might not!" a voice snapped behind them. It was Luke, the kid, speaking, but his voice had changed considerably to taut wire. He jerked off his specs and shoved his hat far back on his red head.

"Holy smoke!" Ezra screeched, "That's

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the hombre who paid for Sam's funeral. I'd know that voice anywhere! He's . . . he's the one. . . . ."

"Sure," Luke said, "I'm the one you aimed to frame for all the hell that's been sproutin' hereabouts. I'm afraid I won't be able to accommodate you, gents. I've got the evidence I wanted. You've all been just about as dumb an' clumsy as Sam was."

"What are you gettin' at?" Ezra snapped, not bothering to replace the handkerchief which had slipped down about his throat.

LUKE WAS busy polishing something on the sleeve of his jumper, and there was a gleam in his eye. "When I rode toward Jackarand the other night, I knew I was bein' followed. I dropped this"—he indicated the thing he was polishing on his sleeve—"where it could be easily found. I knew that if an honest man picked it up, he'd be glad to return it to me. I figgered mebbe Sam wasn't honest, so I made believe I was rustlin' cattle and when Sam caught up with me he was so confused he tried to kill me. I killed him first."

"But why did you hanker to pay for his fancy funeral?" Paddy growled, edging around to the side of the team.

"To see where the money would go. I won some of it back from you an' them crooked friends of your last night, Paddy. You see, it was marked money."

"Kid, you just signed your death warrant. I reckon I know what that is you're polishing on yore sleeve," Paddy said calmly.

Luke held up the deputy marshal's badge so they could all see it.

"Lawman!" Ezra squealed.

Paddy's gun roared. His first shot knocked the badge from Luke's fingers. Then Luke crouched down. He seemed to fill out and his eyes were chips of ice. He snatched a gun from under the oversize jumper and fired as he leaped sidewise.

His first shot missed Paddy, and Paddy fired again, nicking Luke's arm. The

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other gunnies had flung themselves from the wagon and were limbering up their hardware. Luke dodged sidewise trying to get a bead on Paddy Long. Bullets spanged about him and then from behind came the roar of Esteban's old single-action .44, sending one of the gunnies kicking under the feet of the horses.

Luke had Paddy in the clear then. Paddy, cursing like a wild man, fired wildly. Luke moved forward, swaying a little, his lips arched in a cold smile. The gun in his hand jumped once—twice! Paddy grabbed for his stomach but before he could reach it a third shot bored him between the eyes.

The other two gunnies stood with their hands up when Luke turned upon them, but Ezra was hobbling through the brush, trying to reach his horse. He never reached the horse because Sheriff Hipple rode around the tree Ezra was heading for, and chased the trembling undertaker back with the other bandits.

"Dammit, kid, I was almost too late," the sheriff lamented. "They might've kilt you."

Luke shook his head, "Not them, sheriff. I told you not to follow me too close or you'd likely have scared these hyenas off."

Ezra whined, "I didn't have nothin' to do with it, sheriff. Banker Howard made me follow the wagon. He wanted his money back."

"Did they get the money?" The sheriff grinned.

"No," Luke replied. "You see, Sam Mathews was sort of taking care of it for me."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Ezra asked, still nonplussed by this young deputy marshal who worked in such odd ways.

Luke led the way to the wagon and, tapping the circle in the face of the headstone with his gun, he dislodged it to uncover a hollow in the stone in which reposed the leather bag with the two thousand dollars in gold.

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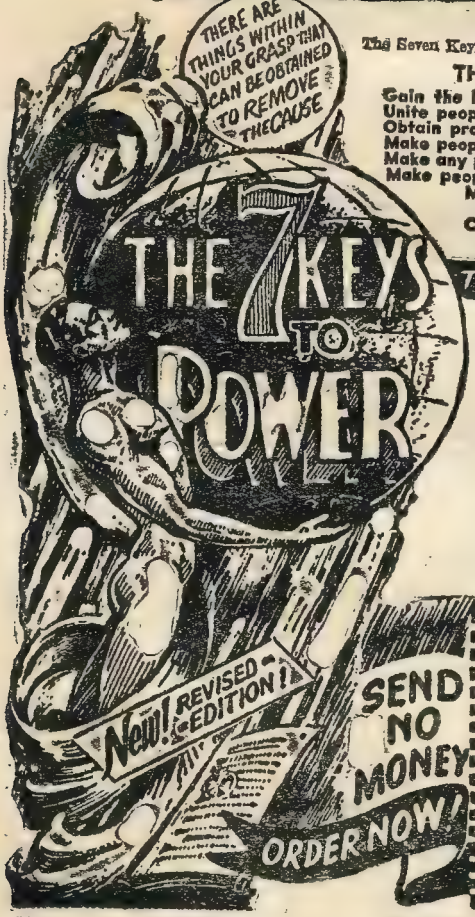
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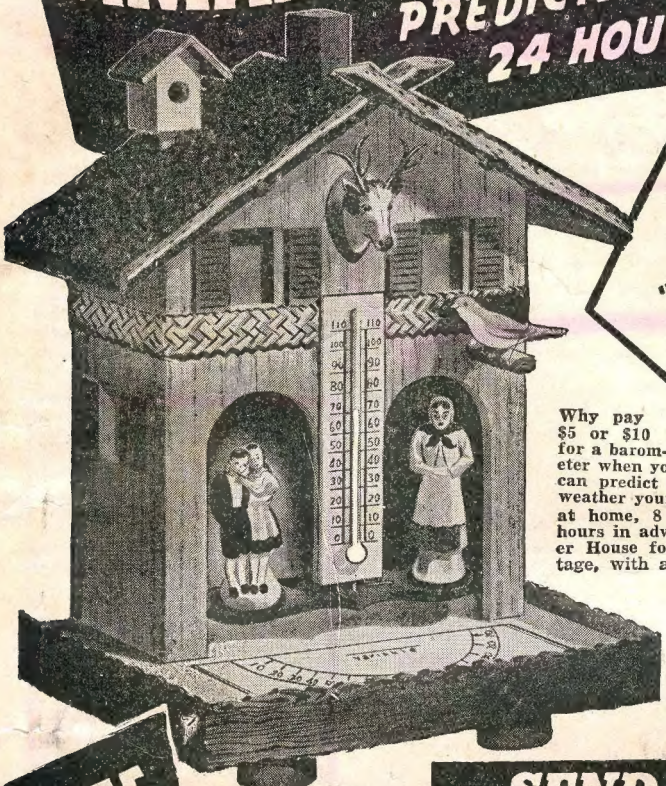

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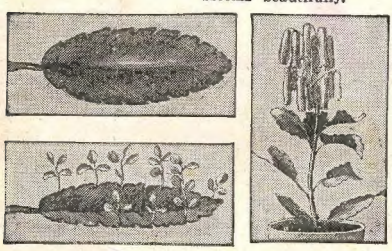

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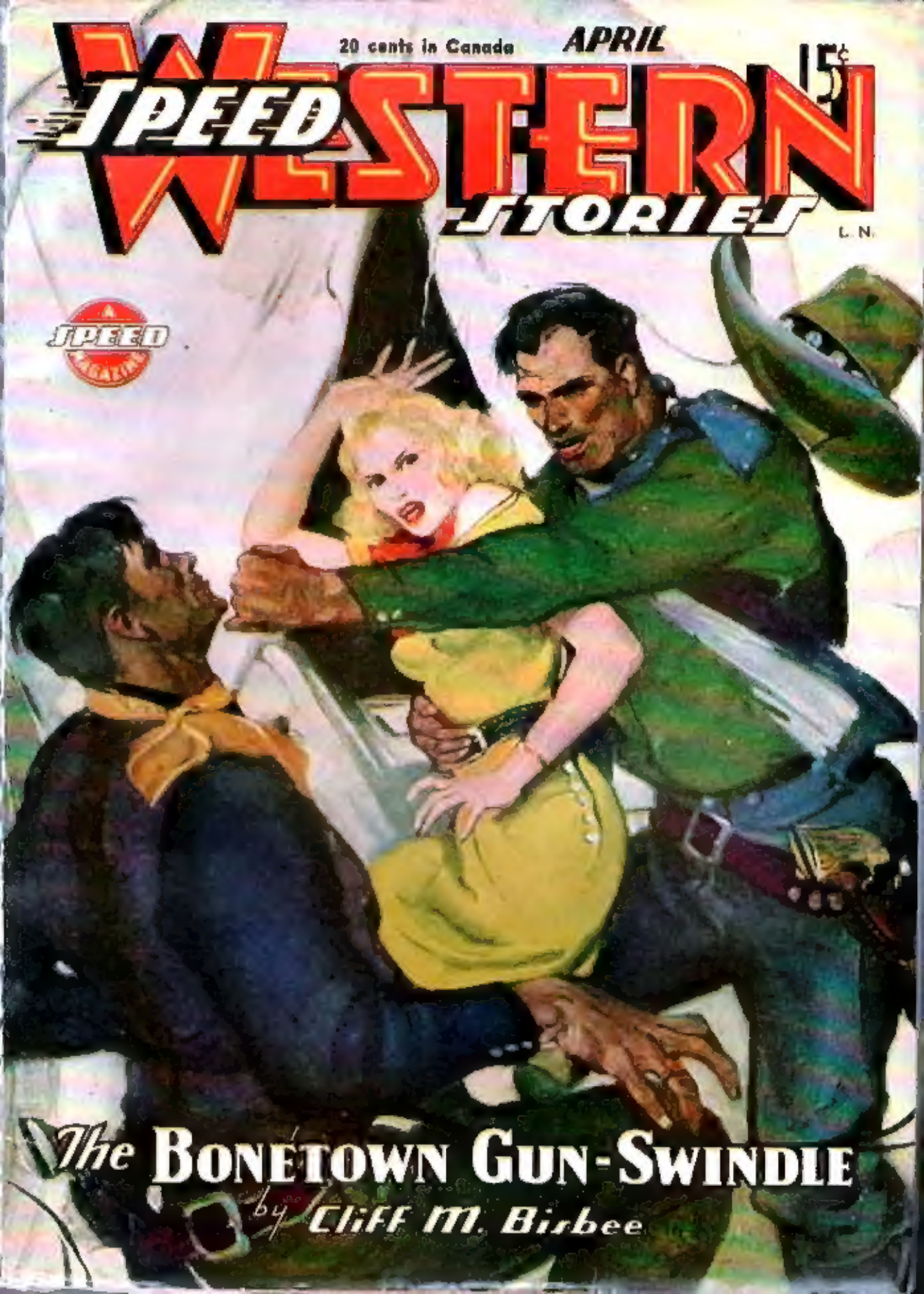

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